TWO WOMEN.

BY

GEORGIANA M. CRAIK,

AUTHOR OF

"MILDRED," "FAITH UNWIN'S ORDEAL," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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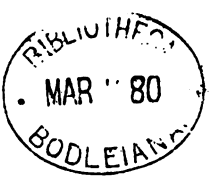

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TWO WOMEN.

CHAPTER I.

"OH, I promised you this dance did I?"

"If you will look at your card, you will find that you did."

"But I don't want to take the trouble of looking at my card. If you say I promised you, I suppose you must be right."

"There is no doubt that you promised."

"Well, then, I am very sorry."

"But I hope you don't expect me to withdraw my claim because you say you are sorry?"

"I don't know what you mean by withdrawing your claim; but, you see, if I am too tired to stand, it is clear that I can't dance. You must see that plainly—do you not?"

The girl who made this inquiry was leaning back in a luxuriously cushioned easy-chair; she was fanning herself languidly, and her face had an expression in it of supreme indifference. She hardly condescended, even as she asked her question, to glance at her companion, who was standing by her side, regarding her intently, with a look of growing anger in his eyes.

"I see—that you mean to throw me over—for the second time," he said, half aloud, after a moment or two's silence.

"For the second time, is it? I don't recollect," she composedly replied.

"Did you not do exactly what you are doing now at the Woodleighs', a fortnight ago?"

"Did I? I was very tired at the Woodleighs' I know."

"You refused me a waltz after you had promised it to me."

"Very probably. Do you think it is a girl's business to go on dancing till she faints?"

"I should be very sorry to see you dance till you fainted."

"If you object to an uncertain position, have you not the remedy in your own hands?"

"You mean—can I not cease to ask you?"

"Exactly."

"Would that make it all right for me, do you suppose?"

"Certainly it would. And since you are so eager to dance now, pray don't let me detain you. I see half-a-dozen girls at this moment who would be charmed to waltz with you. Why do you not go and choose one of them?"

"I do not see what right you can have to make me go away. You may refuse to dance with me; but, at least, you must leave me at liberty, I think, to stay beside you."

"I have no intention of interfering with your liberty. I thought you were anxious to secure a partner, that is all."

"You know very well that if you refuse to be my partner, I care very little about any other."

"Oh, no,"—with a soft low laugh—"I don't know that at all."

"How can you tell me that you don't know it? There is nothing that you know better."

"I have noticed before now, Mr. Hastings, that you are very much addicted to assuming things. Pray assume nothing, so far as I am concerned. Give me no credit for knowing matters of which I know nothing."

"And for which, evidently, you care nothing," he said bitterly.

"Precisely; for which I care nothing. You could not have put it more exactly," she replied.

And then there was a sudden silence between them, and, flirting her fan gracefully, she sat tranquilly looking at the dancers, without giving either another word or look to her companion.

He, on his part, stood leaning against a window at his back, and hardly moved his eyes from her face. He looked flushed and angry, and yet it was clear that he had not resolution enough to leave her.

The girl was wonderfully pretty. As she sat in her white ball-dress, with her fair complexion and golden hair, she looked like a flower. She had delicate features, and long brown lashes, that she had a trick of drooping, and eyes which, when she raised them, had a dangerous power of fascination—a power of which she was very conscious, but which, with a shrewd instinct, she used only very sparingly. The rarity of her glances, she was well aware, made their effect the greater; what we wait for long we value the more when we gain, she knew.

"Look, do you see that girl in yellow?" she began to say quietly to Mr. Hastings, after the pause had lasted for a little while. "That is my cousin, who has just come from Paris. She is pretty, isn't she? If you like school-girls, I will introduce you to her."

"Have you any reason to suppose that I like school-girls?" he answered gloomily.

She laughed at his tone.

"I don't know. They are so fresh that I think, if I were a man, I should," she said.

"As you are not a man, your opinion is not, perhaps, of very much value."

"Well, perhaps not. But Lotty is very pretty, and she is graceful, at least, if she is not amusing. Who is that she is dancing with?"

"I don't know."

"I wish you would ask somebody. I was noticing him a little while ago."

"I can't ask anybody at this moment. Besides, what does it signify?"

"I think he has a nice face. I like those big fair men.

"Do you?"

"Yes. I always like fair men better than dark ones. I am always glad, in my own case, that I am fair."

"That is not to be wondered at."

"I am glad you say so. I was afraid you were going to give me a lecture on my vanity."

"I should never think of giving *you* a lecture upon anything."

"No?"

"Never. Do you think there would be any use in it, if I did?"

"I don't suppose there would. But people are not always deterred from doing things by knowing that it is useless to do them."

"No, you may very well say that,"— bitterly.

"It is the experience of the world in general, I believe."

"And it is Miss Verner's experience, I believe, in particular?"

"Miss Verner, I repeat, gets credited often with knowing a great deal more than she does."

"She can scarcely"—in a low hard voice—"get credited with too much knowledge in one direction."

"Indeed?" composedly.

"Do you question it?"

"I question nothing. When people talk in enigmas I never try to understand them. I wish this dance would come to an end! Is it not going on a long time?"

"You are quite rested now, I suppose? Quite ready for your next partner?" with half-smothered wrath.

"Yes, I am fairly rested."

"Are you going to give me another waltz, to make up for this one that you have taken from me?"

"How can you ask me such a question? Is it likely, at this time in the

evening, that I should have any waltz disengaged?"

"You hesitate very little—as I know to my cost—about throwing your partners over when you please. I have seen you do it often, with little enough scruple. For that matter, you have done it before now for me."

"Have I? Then I am very sorry. I can only hope that I may never do so again."

"That you may never do so again, you mean, on my account?"

"Yes. Is it not my doing it on your account that you are condemning?"

She turned her head round at the last words, and raised her eyes to his with a momentary smile. The smile seemed to say: "Are you so foolish as to think that I mean all my lips speak?"

This was the guerdon that she flung to him to compensate him for the half-hour during which she had tormented him; and, like a fool, as he felt himself to be, he took his reward, and let it soothe him.

The next moment she had risen from her seat.

"Can we get across the room, do you think?" she said. "I want to speak to Mary Wilson before she begins to dance again. Ah, Lotty, I have been watching you waltzing," she suddenly exclaimed, stopping abruptly as, just after she had risen, and, with her hand on Mr. Hastings' arm, was beginning to thread her way through the crowd, she came face to face with her cousin and her cousin's partner. "I have been sitting down through this dance, for I was so tired."

"Dear me!—tired, were you!" exclaimed Lotty, amazed. "I think it is so

delightful that I feel as if I could never get tired."

Miss Verner laughed, and the gentleman with whom Lotty had been dancing smiled too, and their mutual amusement made their eyes meet for a moment. A few more words were said, and then Miss Verner and Mr. Hastings passed on, and when they were out of hearing, Lotty's partner said to her in rather a tone of interest,

"Who was that?"

"Oh, that was my cousin—Cicely Verner. Isn't she pretty?" Lotty answered eagerly.

"Yes—very pretty; beautiful," replied the gentleman.

"She is so wonderfully admired. I never knew anything like it."

"I don't wonder at that."

"Oh, but it is—it is dreadful, almost. She can't go anywhere but people go wild

about her. They say that it's a great deal her own fault, at least some people do; but I think that is so ill-natured," exclaimed simple Lotty.

"Her own fault that she is admired?" asked the gentleman with a laugh.

"Yes, because they call her a flirt, you know. But I think it is very unkind of other girls to call her a flirt."

"Well—that perhaps depends upon whether she deserves to be called one."

"Oh yes, I suppose so. Only she seems to me so very nice that I can't believe she would do anything that is wrong."

"And so you think then that flirting is wrong?"

"Oh!" opening her eyes, "isn't it?"

"I don't know. I am asking you."

"But—I can't tell. I am only just out, you see."

"That is true. Then I must defer my

question till next season, I suppose? Look, there is a chair," said the gentleman. "Should you like to sit down? I think that lady in black is making signs to you."

"Oh, that is my aunt: that is Mrs. Verner. Will you come and speak to her?" asked Lotty, hesitating a little, and not quite knowing whether the proper moment had come for dropping her partner's arm. Perhaps in her simple heart she was not particularly anxious to drop it, for he danced delightfully, and he was very handsome, she thought: she looked up rather wistfully as she gave her doubtful invitation to him, and when he accepted it a gleam of pleasure came into her eyes.

"Aunt, I have had such a lovely dance with—with this gentleman," she was saying eagerly the next moment, looking, however, rather embarrassed as she sud-

denly discovered that she had forgotten his name.

"Have you, Lotty? That is very pleasant."

Mrs. Verner smiled on her niece, and then bent her head to her niece's partner. He was a presentable looking man, and so she allowed the smile which she had given to Lotty to extend itself to him. She said something to him about the heat of the room, and then they exchanged a few more words. She was a very handsome woman, and suave and courteous in manner; but not much like her daughter, he thought.

He turned from her after a few moments, to find his partner for the next dance. Half an hour later, as he was making his way through the crowd, his passage was arrested for a moment close to Mrs. Verner's chair, and she spoke to him a second time, and as he paused to answer

her he found that her daughter was by her side.

Perhaps, had Mrs. Verner been alone, the young man would only have replied to her remark, and would then have passed on; but, seeing her daughter, his curiosity was enough aroused to make him fall back from the crowd. She was certainly extremely pretty, he thought; was she in reality so mischievous, he wondered, as that little school-girl had told him people said she was?

I suppose no man is ever afraid of encountering a woman because he has heard it said of her beforehand that the world calls her a flirt. This man, at any rate, felt no alarm at finding himself by Miss Verner's side: when after a minute she joined in the talk that her mother had begun with him, he turned to reply to her willingly enough.

She had made some remark about the crowding of the rooms.

"Yes, they are very full, but London rooms are always that, I suppose," he answered: and then Mrs. Verner addressed him again.

"I hear that you have only just come up from Oxford, Mr. Ludlow?" she said abruptly. "Yes, you see I have learnt your name," she added with a smile. "I thought I saw something familiar in your face when you were speaking to me a little while ago, and I find now that I have a right to recognize you, for I once knew your father very well. And I am told you have been giving your friends great cause to congratulate you," she went on very graciously, "so though I am only a very new acquaintance, you must let me, for your father's sake, congratulate you too."

"You are very good," the young

man replied pleasantly in answer to this speech, though he looked a little surprise.

"I should like to introduce my daughter to you. May I? Cicely, this is Mr. Hugh Ludlow," said Mrs. Verner: and then the young people bowed, and Cicely said—

"I think I have sometimes met your sister. Have you not got a sister who knows Miss Linton?"

They were all talking together easily enough in two minutes after this. Presently Hugh asked Miss Verner if he might hope to have the pleasure of dancing with her, and the girl began to examine her card.

"I am afraid it is full," she said at first, shaking her head, "unless—oh yes, here is one waltz that I think I might give you," she suddenly added, with the simplest air in the world.

"Which one?" he asked, for he could see no vacancy.

"Oh—this, just before supper. My cousin Fred has put down his name for it; but, mamma, I don't think it matters —does it?—about Fred."

"Well, no—I daresay not. You know best, my dear," her mother blandly answered.

"I don't think it does. I will get him some other partner. So if you like to take this dance, Mr. Ludlow"—

Of course Hugh said he was delighted, and wrote down his name readily in the place of that of the discarded Fred; but when a few minutes afterwards he took his leave for the present of Miss Verner, he went away laughing a little in his sleeve.

"Women are charming creatures!" he exclaimed to himself. "Most simple-natured, single-hearted daughters of Eve! So

this beauty condescends to throw out her line to catch me, does she? Well, even she, pretty as she is, may find that she sometimes angles in vain."

There were one or two dances to come before the one for which he was to claim Miss Verner. Several times before he rejoined her, he caught sight of her again in different parts of the room, sometimes dancing, sometimes seated, and hardly so much talking as allowing herself to be talked to: once he discovered her engaged in an apparently earnest discussion with a man who was listening to her rather sulkily.

Hugh himself at this time was dancing for the second time with Lotty, and he called her attention to the man who was with her cousin, and asked her who he was.

"Oh, that is Fred, my brother," the girl answered, at once; and then (while

Hugh was laughing again to himself) after a few moments' pause—

"I don't know how it is, but Fred doesn't get on with Cicely," she said, in her simple way, and rather in a tone of anxiety. "I am afraid sometimes it is because Fred is too fond of her. Does he not look as if she was making him cross now?"

"Well, he certainly does not look over well pleased," Hugh said. "But I dare-say it is his own fault," he added, rather maliciously next moment. "Perhaps he won't do something that your cousin wants."

"Oh, Cicely always makes him do what she wants. He grumbles sometimes, but of course he never refuses. He couldn't, you know," said Lotty, in an explanatory way.

"Well, that at any rate is satisfactory," answered Hugh.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Lotty; but Hugh only laughed, and did not repeat his remark.

Miss Verner smiled very pleasantly on Mr. Ludlow when he came at the appointed time to give his arm to her. She danced exquisitely, and he too danced well; she told him, before they had been many minutes together, that she had not enjoyed so good a waltz all the evening.

"It is so wonderfully rare in waltzing to find anybody who really suits you," she said to him frankly. "Don't you think it is? I suppose there must be something in our two heights that makes us fit well together?"

And then she looked at him—they were standing resting for a few minutes—and, "I am five feet seven; how tall are you? You are six feet, are you not?" she said.

"Not quite; a little over five feet eleven," he replied.

"That is such a pleasant height. I think no man ought to be under about five foot ten. I don't like giants, but I think from five foot ten to six feet is just perfection," she said.

"I am very glad you do," Hugh replied, with a laugh.

"You must excuse me for speaking so warmly; but you see at this moment the matter has a personal interest for me. Your height seems to suit me so very well."

"Shall we try another turn then?" Hugh asked.

This waltz was the last dance before supper, and when they went presently to the supper-room Mr. Ludlow had the pleasure of taking Miss Verner there, and of enjoying a great deal of conversation with her.

It was the habit with Cicely Verner to assume at times a very languid and weary

manner; but, to tell the truth, she only adopted this style towards those whose society had ceased to be very attractive to her. When she pleased she could be animated enough, and certainly Hugh, as he sat talking by her side to-night, found no lack of spirit in her talk. She laid herself out to be charming, and, in a way, Hugh acknowledged that she was charming. She was so lovely that it could not but be a pleasure to look at her; she was so frank and seemed to take so great an interest in her companion that, almost against his will, Hugh felt himself flattered.

"What was that mamma was saying about people congratulating you?" she asked him, as they sat at supper. "What are they congratulating you about? Is it something that you have been doing?"

"No, nothing at all. I think Mrs. Verner was merely good enough to mean

that she was glad I had not been plucked just now at Oxford," he replied, laughing. "That was the whole."

"Oh, have you been taking your degree just now at Oxford?"

"Yes."

"And you have passed very well, I suppose?"

"Fairly well."

"I am sure it must have been more than fairly well, or mamma would not have said what she did. I am very glad. How I do envy people who can go to College!"

"Do you? I should not think you had much need to envy anybody."

"I think it must be so delightful there; and all the young men, they seem to have such a charming feeling amongst them of comradeship. I think," with a pretty air of earnestness, "the effect upon them must be so very good."

"The effect varies a good deal," Hugh said, a little drily. "No doubt it is very good in some cases."

"You are not going back to Oxford now, I suppose, any more?"

"No."

"Then what are you going to do?" with a look of grave interest.

"Oh, well, I hardly know yet."

"I think you ought to go to the Bar."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I like lawyers. I think it is such a nice thing for a man to be a barrister—don't you?"

"Yes, a successful barrister is rather an enviable man. But unfortunately it generally takes a long time to become successful."

"No doubt; but then I think that is one of the advantages of it."

"One of the advantages of a profession

that you take a long time to make money by it?" Hugh said, with a laugh.

"Oh, I don't mean that exactly; but when people are going to be barristers then nobody expects them to make money, and I think that is so nice. It is so dreadful to be always plodding and toiling as if your life depended on it. Now you have just been working very hard at College, I am sure, and so if I were you, before I did anything else, I would take a really good long rest. Why should you not? Why should you not go for a year or two abroad?"

"Because—" Hugh began, and then hesitated for a moment,—"well, because I want to do that thing that you think so objectionable; because I want to make money at home."

"Do you really?" and Miss Verner's eyes opened rather wide.

"Yes. Is there anything so unusual in that?"

"Oh no—no, I suppose not." (But Hugh thought he detected an unconscious alteration in her tone). "I only imagined —I mean, I did not know that you had to mind about making money."

"Most men have to mind about making money in some degree—more or less." Some other words were on his lips, but he did not say them.

"Oh yes, in some degree, of course."

"It does not follow, because a man may be well off, that he is ready to keep his son in idleness, or even that the son himself may wish to be idle."

"No—all sons wouldn't wish it, but I think a great many would. I am afraid I should for one, if I were anybody's son," said Miss Verner, laughing, and with the pleasantest frankness. "You see, there is so much that is de-

lightful in the world. I am sure if I were a young man—now, for instance, if I were you—I would not tie myself down to work the moment I had left College. I would take one or two pleasant years at any rate. Why do you not? Don't you think you ought?"

"I am afraid not," Hugh said, with a half laugh.

"Well, I can't think that you are right."

"But suppose there should be circumstances, of which you are ignorant?"

"Oh then, of course I cannot say any more. I was only assuming that your case might be a common one—like other people's."

"And it happens to be not altogether like other people's. I quite agree with you that it would be very pleasant to spend a year or two in travelling; but unfortunately that is a luxury that I cannot

look forward to," said Hugh, with something like a tone of regret.

(Perhaps the accent caught his own ears, and made him half ashamed; perhaps, too, he told himself that he was rather a fool to sit here, and drop hints to this girl about his position, in the way he was doing. He had better keep his position to himself. But nevertheless, though he knew this, he let her go on questioning him, and let himself reply to her questions.)

"It seems a pity," she said.

"Perhaps it is not. It may be better for me to work than to do anything else."

"Oh no. I hardly think that can be, when there is so much to interest one, if only one had time to go in search of it. I can't think that it can be best to turn one's back upon everything that is most delightful, and fall to working and money making, as if working and

money making were the one aim of life. I think almost the greatest gain in being rich is that it gives people leisure. At any rate that must be its greatest advantage to men."

"True," said Hugh, in a grave voice.

He began to think that this girl had more sense than he had given her credit for at first. Had not the remark she had just made passed often through his own mind?

"Yes, leisure is great gain. Men who take the burden of life early on their shoulders lose a good deal," he said.

"Then they ought not to do it. I am sure they ought not—unless they are obliged. And I can't think how you are obliged?" she added, with a frank look of inquiry almost like a child's.

It was such an apparently innocent look that he laughed at it; it was so

pretty a look that he let himself be tempted to reply to it.

"I am obliged—because I am bound," he said abruptly.

"By what? Oh, but I am afraid you will think me very rude! I suppose I must not ask?"

"You are not rude at all. I feel very much flattered by your having any desire to ask."

"Then if you say that, I think you will tell me?"

But at this appeal he only laughed.

"I am afraid not," he said.

"But why? Is it a secret?"

"Perhaps."

"I think you are only trying to puzzle me, and to rouse my curiosity, when there is nothing for it to be roused about."

"I fear that is very near the truth. At least I am very sure that if I told you

what you have just been asking, you would find it had not been worth being curious about."

"Well, that is possible, no doubt. But nevertheless I should like you to tell me. I am very fond of making people tell me things."

"Are you? Then, in that case, I should think you had a great many things told to you."

"Yes. I have a great many; and I don't make a bad confidant, because I can keep secrets very well."

"Don't you do most things very well? I should think you did."

"No; if you think that really (which I doubt) you are quite wrong. I can only do a very few things at all, and even some of them I do badly."

"I have become aware of one or two already that at any rate you don't do

badly,—that, on the contrary, you do superlatively well."

"Really? I feel as if I ought to get up and make you a curtsey. Only I can't conceive what they are."

"No?"

"Well, I suppose for one thing you may possibly mean that I dance pretty well. I do dance fairly, I know. But what else you can have in your mind, seeing that our acquaintanceship is only about an hour old, I cannot imagine! Are you not going to tell me?"

"I am afraid not."

"Well, I will ask you again, when I know you better—if I ever do know you better. Only perhaps after to-night I may never see you any more."

"I hope that is not likely."

"Oh, it is likely enough,—if you go to this hard work, you know. You will have no time then for such frivolities as balls."

"Shall I not?"

"People who dance ought to be idle. They ought to have their time and their thoughts both unoccupied. I think your thoughts are too much occupied even already," said the girl suddenly with a laugh, and rising from her seat. "I have been making you talk nonsense here for the last half hour, and keeping your mind all that time from its grave occupations. Pray forgive me, and take me upstairs now,—and I won't trouble you any more."

"Yes, she is a pretty creature,—and a flirt, to the inmost core of her heart,—if she has got a heart at all," Hugh was saying to himself with a half laugh, an hour or so after this, as in the quiet dawn of the June day he was wending his way home. Besides the time that he had sat with her at supper, he had spent some further portion of this

last hour in Miss Verner's company; how it had come about he did not quite know; he had a half suspicion that Miss Verner herself had managed it; but, if she had done so, he was a very willing captive. Some partner, at the moment he was required, had disappeared conveniently, and Hugh had been able in consequence to dance with her again; and then, during the dance and after it, they had a good deal more talk together; and Mrs. Verner also came to him, and was very gracious, and told him that she should be glad to see him at her own house.

"Come any day you like," she said. "We have no stated days. I am always so glad to see my friends that I like to welcome them whenever they are good enough to call. Come soon, and I shall be very pleased to see you."

And then she gave him her hand, and pressed his quite tenderly.

"You know I want you to come for your father's sake as well as for your own. You are so like your father," she said.

"Such humbug! When no human being ever thought me like the governor before!" Hugh exclaimed, thinking of that remark as he walked home. And the next day—or rather, I should say at breakfast on the same day, a few hours later—he made his father and mother and Phœbe laugh with his account of the fair widow, who had taken, as he declared, so prodigious a liking to him.

"She tells me that it is mainly for your sake, Sir," Hugh said, "but I doubt that. I can't help thinking that it is my own charms that have made an impression on her."

"Well, she made an impression on *me* once, my boy," Mr. Ludlow confessed

frankly, "so perhaps she may think, like father, like son. But—have you a care of Madam Verner—for a woman who has done more mischief in her way, it is my belief does not live at this moment in London."

"And she has a daughter who is as bad as herself," said Phœbe coolly, in her hard tone.

"Oh — come, Phœbe!" exclaimed Hugh.

"But she has," repeated Phœbe unmoved, "whether you believe it or not. Miss Verner is the most outrageous flirt I ever knew. I have only met her once or twice, but I could tell you pretty stories about her. It is Cicely that Hugh had better be on his guard against, not Mrs. Verner. I think it will be very foolish of him if he goes and calls on them."

But when Phœbe said this, Hugh

declared positively that it would be impossible for him not to call once. He had promised, and should he not do it, and afterwards meet them again, what could he say for himself?

"Besides—why, even the most voracious spider that ever lived never catches into her net more than a very small percentage of the flies that come within a dangerous distance of it," he exclaimed impatiently. "For my own part, I don't believe half those stories about girls' mischievousness. I know that this one is a flirt, but there is the beginning and the end of it; and I have come across flirts enough before now not to be afraid of Miss Verner."

So after this Phœbe held her peace, and Hugh, without saying more, resolved that he would make his call within a very few days.

CHAPTER II.

HUGH LUDLOW'S people had not said much to him when he returned home from Wales three years ago. They had all received him very cordially, and his first evening with them was spent most amicably, without any one making the slightest allusion to the subject that was in all their minds.

But the next day his father said a few words to him about it.

"So it seems, Hugh," he began, "as matters have turned out, that your going

to Mr. Calcott's has been something of a waste of time. Well, I am sorry for it, because I don't think you have any time to spare. But you seem to have been enjoying yourself, at any rate." And then he looked straight at Hugh, whose face was flushing scarlet, and— "Pray, may I ask," he said, in a cool dry way, "what is the end of the business with this young lady that you wrote about?"

"What do you suppose it is likely to be, Sir?" asked Hugh, instantly, drawing himself up very erect.

"Well—I told you in my note the other day what it had better be. *I* call the whole thing absurd. Of course, if you liked to marry your mother's kitchen-maid I couldn't prevent you. I should merely ask you, in that case, as I do in this,—how do you propose to keep your wife?"

"You know very well, Sir, that I don't propose to marry till I have left Oxford," exclaimed Hugh, hotly.

"I certainly hoped you didn't, but you didn't make even that quite clear. Your letter was such a rhapsody," said Mr. Ludlow, composedly, "that it was not easy to make out from it what you meant. So you intend to wait till you have left Oxford? and then, no doubt, you think you will be quite as eager as you are now to marry this little Welsh girl?"

"Yes—we mean to wait, of course," said Hugh, haughtily, not condescending to reply at all to the last part of Mr. Ludlow's question.

"Oh—the young lady consents too, does she? And what about my old friend? To judge from the letters he has sent me, your proceedings have sorely troubled him. But, he intends to

exert a little authority over his niece, I think?"

"You mean that he has, *at your request*, forbidden her to write to me?" said Hugh, flaming up into sudden bitterness and indignation. "Yes, Sir, you have managed that. You have succeeded in separating us—for the present."

Mr. Ludlow began softly to rub his hands.

"Gently, my boy," he said, with a half-chuckle. "Don't lose your temper. What I have done, you won't be so very sorry for my having done some day. You have only got to wait, you know. Wait till you have the means to marry, and then, if you still want to marry Miss Wilmot, do it; and neither your mother nor I will try to prevent you. What is there hard in all that? Upon my word, I think you have very little to complain of!"

And then Mr. Ludlow turned away, and went off laughing.

After this Hugh, being very sore at heart, talked to his mother and Phœbe on the subject of his engagement to Dorothy, and they gave him such consolation as their views of the matter admitted.

"My dear boy, I know it seems hard," Mrs. Ludlow said gently to him, "but you cannot expect that we who are old should feel about this as you do, who are one-and-twenty. Your father thinks that if you should marry Miss Wilmot—that is to say, if you, with your position and prospects, should marry a small farmer's daughter—you would be throwing yourself away, and I agree with him; I cannot do anything but agree. But still, Hugh, we are not tyrants. If you should still feel as you do now three or four years after this—well, I will say then, marry her if you like."

"Yes; and, I suppose, keep her as I can," Hugh exclaimed, bitterly.

"Your father will see to that, my dear."

"No—he tells me he will *not* see to it. He says, 'Find the means, and then you can marry if you please.'"

"That is only his way of talking, Hugh. Of course, he will not be very anxious to make things easy for you; but, if you wait to please us, he will not leave you in the end without help."

"I shall wait, of course. I never thought of doing anything else. It is not the waiting I think hard," cried Hugh, "but the way in which my father has stepped in, and forced Mr. Calcott to refuse to let me write to Dorothy. I think he had no right to do that, mother, and I cannot forgive him for doing it!" exclaimed the young man, passionately.

"Hugh, you must not speak so. If your father is to blame for preventing your correspondence with Miss Wilmot, I am to blame for that too. I know, my dear, that the part we are taking seems cruel to you; but, if your affection is as great as you think it to be, it will bear this test."

"I don't think you have any reasonable right to apply such a test to it, mother."

"You must leave us to be the judges of that."

"If you kindled a fire and then went away and left it, no one would think you reasonable if you came back long afterwards and expected it to be still alight. The fire may have been well kindled, but any fire whatever needs fuel to keep it burning."

And then Mrs. Ludlow made no answer (too well pleased, perhaps, with her son's

metaphor to be at all anxious to deny that it fitted the case), and Hugh was too angry to say more.

There was little use, indeed, in saying anything. Phœbe began to state her view of the case to him presently, and he did not stand Phœbe's strictures with much patience.

"It seems to me that you have acted as if you were mad," said Phœbe.

"It would be a good thing if more people were mad in the same way," retorted Hugh.

"How can you talk such wild nonsense! A good thing if people went recklessly and got themselves engaged!" exclaimed Phœbe, with sternness.

"*You* would have them do that business always, I suppose, in cold blood," replied Hugh.

"I would have them do it with some common sense."

"And how do you know that I have done it without common sense? The way in which you all assume that I have made a fool of myself drives me perfectly frantic!" cried poor Hugh in a fury.

"So it seems, indeed," Phœbe said.

"You condemn me for doing a thing about the rightness or wrongness of which you are utterly in the dark. What do you know of Dorothy Wilmot?"

"I don't know anything."

"Then what right have you to judge her?"

"I don't judge her. Who is saying anything about her? What we are talking of is your folly, in wanting to engage yourself, at your age, to a girl who is not in your own position."

"Not in my position!" with indescribable scorn.

"Yes, not in your position. You know very well that she is not, and that before doing such a thing you ought to have considered what you owed to us all, instead of rushing blindly into it, for a momentary gratification, as you have done. But you were always selfish," said Phœbe, in her cold way. "You were always selfish, as long back as I can remember. I am sure I don't know what you mean to do now."

"I don't mean to do anything. What do you suppose it is possible to do?"

"I do think Miss Wilmot must be a very strange kind of girl to have been willing to engage herself to you without knowing anything about your family."

"You said this moment that you did not judge her, and yet you are judging her now!"

"Well, I can't help saying that of her. Anyone would say it. She can't be very particular."

"I think you had better not talk about her till you know a little of what she is."

"I am sure I don't want to talk about her. She has been the cause of a great deal of annoyance to us all; we should be willing enough neither to talk of her nor to think of her if we could," said Phœbe, and shrugged her shoulders, and sat down to her piano.

So Hugh, you see, did not meet with much sympathy in his love matters from his own people, and, after spending rather a gloomy week at home, he went up unconsoled to Oxford. He went resolved to work hard, and he did work, for Dorothy's sake (not much, I fear, for the sake of the father and mother who had centered so many hopes in him; but then they had crossed his wishes, and so he

was wroth with them). He worked for Dorothy, denying himself almost every pleasure, studying early and late, pouring out his heart sometimes in letters to her that he could not send, and occasionally, at intervals of a few months, writing notes of earnest inquiry to Mr. Calcott, in which there were always some messages which he begged might be delivered to Dorothy—messages that Mr. Calcott would acknowledge with formal courtesy, and for which he always curtly said that Dorothy returned him her thanks. She always sent her thanks to him, but never anything more, till, as time went on, the young man grew half maddened with his vain and impotent longings.

Once, after many months, in his intense desire to get some token of remembrance from her, he enclosed a note to her in one of his letters to Mr. Calcott, imploring him to let her read and answer it;

but the old man almost angrily sent it back.

"It is not generous of you to try to make me break my promise," he wrote. "I have already conceded too much to you. Be content, lest what you have should be made less."

So Hugh had to remain unsatisfied, and, with the grain of sustenance that was given to him, to work on as he could.

Perhaps, to speak truthfully, it was during the first year after his separation from her that Dorothy most distinctly, or at any rate more exclusively than in those that followed, was the object for whose sake Hugh worked. For that first year his love for her spurred him on as nothing else had ever spurred him; after that he worked equally hard indeed, but he worked as much because his ambition had by that time been aroused, as because he burnt with desire to please her. That

desire was still ardent in him, but it had ceased to be supreme. And she herself, dear though she continued to be to him, had faded a little perhaps, and retreated just a step or two from the foreground of his thoughts. His life had begun to take present form without her; his days were full; his work engrossed him; and Dorothy, by gradual degrees, became something to him that did not fill all the world.

But yet he continued very faithful to her, though his love, from being the greatest disturbing element that his life had ever known, subsided slowly into a gentler and less agitating feeling. Perhaps he was too busy to have time to think of her as he had thought at first; but still, though she might be less constantly present to him, he never allowed, even to his own heart, that his devotion to her was less, or that he repented of the rela-

tion in which he had placed himself to her.

Only possibly by the time his College life was ending, when nearly all his mind and all his energies were absorbed in the final work he had to do—possibly, if just at that time he had found suddenly that his life was free from all entanglements, he might have been, not glad, but he would have borne the discovery perhaps with something less than a heart-break. And to some extent he was probably dimly conscious of this, even though he still loyally regarded his engagement as inviolable.

At twenty-four it is perhaps not unusual for us to look back upon ourselves at twenty-one with a distinct sense of the foolishness of that past age. "My own darling!" "My dear little girl!" Hugh often still used to call Dorothy in his thoughts. His remembrance of her love

for him was always a talisman to move him; when he recalled those days that he had passed with her it was like recalling a past Elysium. "If it were all to be done again, I suppose I would again do the whole of it," he often thought. Sometimes still, in quiet moments, a thrill of memory would come across him; he was too busy to think a great deal of her, but sometimes suddenly her face would rise before him, with its beautiful eyes and its sweet smile, and he would hear her quaint talk again, and remember how his kisses had felt upon her lips.

"I would not have anything different," he said often to himself, even though he said it now and then with a sort of sigh, involuntarily wondering sometimes whether when they met again he should find the same charm in her that he had found three years ago. He had grown more critical, he feared, in these three years;

what had satisfied him at their beginning he half dreaded might not satisfy him now. Even when he had known her first, he remembered reluctantly, she had not pleased his taste; before his delight in her had made even her faults and shortcomings dear to him, there had been a period during which she had often startled him not a little, during which he had often assured himself that she was a girl with whom he should never be tempted to fall in love. He had been wrong, no doubt, but still the remembrance of that old feeling would come back to him, bringing a half acknowledged fear that when they met again the feeling itself might again return.

He had gone up to London as soon as his work was over.

"Well, how have you got through, Hugh?" his father asked him, and he merely answered, "I don't know. Possi-

bly pretty well." But when the lists came out his name was found very near indeed to the top. Of course after that they made a good deal of a hero of him.

"Your father is delighted; you don't know how proud he is of you, Hugh," his mother told him. "He thinks now that there is nothing you may not do."

"He must not expect too much of me," replied Hugh, a little quickly, at this speech. "Success at College is very pleasant, of course, but I don't suppose that it is worth very much. Double First Class men, and Senior Wranglers don't always afterwards win all the prizes in life."

"No; but I think it must be their own fault if they don't win some of them. I consider that you have it in your own power now to make a name for yourself."

"I am not so sure about that. There are a good many men in the field trying to make names for themselves."

"Yes; but not so very many with both your ability and your advantages. Think, if you should want to go into public life, how your father could back you."

"But I don't know that I have much intention of going into public life. I must make up my mind, I am afraid," said Hugh, a little lugubriously, "to something rather more humdrum than that."

"I don't know why you should say so. Your father is not likely, I think, to be satisfied with any merely humdrum career for you."

"Perhaps not. But I suppose," rather bitterly, "I shall have to settle that for myself."

"Hugh, don't speak in that way." (For

Mrs. Ludlow knew what the young man meant). "Don't refuse help from your father, or be stiff, and hold yourself aloof from him. You have made him very happy just now; don't undo what you have done."

"I don't want to be stiff; but he knows how the case stands," said Hugh.

"Well, let him help you. Just wait a little, and see what he is willing to do. If you want to gain anything from him you must not be impatient. He won't be ungenerous to you, Hugh—you will find that; but you must give him time. His heart is very full of you just now."

And then Hugh held his peace. He almost felt that he was a coward for holding his peace—and yet what else could he do? His mother, of course, knew what was in his mind; she knew how he was placed, and did she not advise him for his own interest still to

wait for a time? Perhaps—Hugh said to himself—she knew more than she was permitted to disclose of his father's intentions with respect to him; she might know for a certainty that, even if he should persist in fulfilling his engagement to Dorothy, he intended to provide for him, if he would wait a little longer.

"So I suppose I must wait," Hugh thought resignedly. "I suppose I must let a few weeks pass at any rate before I speak to him."

He had already had a kind letter of congratulation from Mr. Calcott, and after this talk with his mother he returned an answer to it, which it cost him some pains to write; for he tried in his reply to explain that, although he hoped that the time was now at last nearly at hand when he might hope to return and claim Dorothy's promise, in point

of fact he as yet did by no means clearly see his way to this desired consummation, and that a little further delay before he appeared at Llanwyck was, he feared, almost unavoidable. His letter was a difficult one to phrase, and he hardly satisfied himself with it, even though he re-wrote it more than once.

It was the beginning of June, and London was of course very full. He had not been more than a week in town when he went to that ball at which he met Cicely Verner. Hitherto, in previous summers, he had not had much time for mixing in the gaieties of a London season; but now he was a free man, and he was told on all hands that he needed rest, or recreation, at least, after his hard work. Perhaps he did, or at any rate he found it pleasant enough to take

it. He had no objection to go into society: he had leisure on his hands, and was by no means unwilling to amuse himself.

CHAPTER III.

THERE was of course no need for Hugh to make any further profession of his intention to call upon the Verners, so he held his peace, and a couple of days after the ball he paid his visit. He really did not care very much about going, for he recognized the fact that they were not likely to prove very desirable acquaintances; they were not people of a kind that he felt any special desire to know; but yet both mother and daughter had been very civil to him, and—as he had

said—how could he, without assigning any cause, neglect an invitation that had been given so cordially? So he went to the house, saying to himself that, though he went once, he need not go again.

Perhaps if he had felt really much desire merely to do what was courteous he might have made his call on a fine day, when they were likely to be out; but, instead of this, the afternoon was dull and rainy, and it was no more than he probably expected when in answer to his inquiry the servant told him that Mrs. Verner was at home. So he went up to the drawing-room, and there he found the mother and daughter sitting together, and alone.

They received him with open arms.

"How good it is of you to come!" Mrs. Verner exclaimed, pressing his hand.

"And how nice of you to come on a wet day like this, when mamma and I have grown tired of one another's company," said Cicely, lifting up her beautiful eyes to him with a smile.

He thought she looked even lovelier than when he had seen her the other night. He had acknowledged her loveliness then, but he had told himself that she was too artificial; now he thought that he had not done her justice—that she was simpler and more natural than he had supposed.

"It is always a good sign when people show most to advantage at home," he found himself reflecting involuntarily.

They began to talk, and the two women made much of Hugh. They were very lively and agreeable; they laid themselves out to be pleasant to him. Mrs. Verner asked him

many questions about himself—"more than I should venture to do, you know, if you were not your father's son," she told him once with a very sweet smile. But when she said this, Hugh answered with a laugh that he had been flattering himself that she had taken so much interest in him for his own sake. He was inwardly highly tickled at Mrs. Verner's tender references to his father: he should like to see a meeting take place between them, he thought.

After a little while had passed some other caller came—another man, and Hugh thought then that he might take his leave; but the new comer, who was grey headed, sat down by Mrs. Verner's side, and on this Cicely took possession of Hugh, and the young man found that it would be impossible without rudeness to retreat.

They had been sitting hitherto at some little distance from one another, but she soon altered this.

"I want you to come and tell me what you think of this picture," she said, rising up, and she carried him off straightway to the farther end of the room. "I can't endure that man," she whispered to him confidentially as soon as she had executed this move. "You don't know him? Well, it is no loss, I can assure you, for I think he is one of the greatest bores in London. He will talk poor mamma dead now." And, facing this catastrophe with great equanimity, she led Hugh up to a likeness of herself that was hanging on the wall.

"It was in the Academy last year. I wonder if you saw it? Do you think it is good?" she said.

"I should hardly call it satisfactory,"

he replied, after he had looked at the picture for a minute.

"No?" she exclaimed in a tone of surprise. "But it flatters me, you know."

"Does it?" he answered with a smile.

"Oh, I am sure it does. I am not half so nice looking as this. I am quite sorry you don't like it better," in a tone of disappointment.

"I don't know why you should be sorry," Hugh replied. "If I think it does not do you justice that ought rather to please you, I should have said."

"Oh, but I did not think of it in that way!" Miss Verner exclaimed with the sweetest air of simplicity. "Of course if you mean that"—

"I don't know how I could mean anything else."

"Well, you see, I did not think you could intend to pay me such a very

great compliment. Do you know, I always feel when I show people this picture that I ought to apologise for having been made so much prettier in it than I am."

"I am afraid you must labour under the disadvantage of having an incorrect eye," Hugh said laughing.

"No, on the contrary. I have a very good eye. I think I could have learnt to draw very well. I am so passionately fond of drawing. But that is one of the things in which it is no use to do anything unless you do a great deal; and so of course," said Cicely modestly, "I don't draw at all."

"I shall conclude from your telling me that, that you draw very well," Hugh coolly returned.

"Mr. Ludlow, you have a dreadful way of not believing me!"

"And have you not a dreadful way,'

replied Hugh, "of saying what you don't mean to be believed?"

She had dropped into a chair by this time, and he had taken a seat beside her. He did not want particularly to stay with her, but yet she was so pretty that he felt a certain pleasure in staying. He sat half leaning over the back of his chair, looking at her, with a very clear comprehension that she was the kind of woman who did not object to be so looked at.

He talked to her for half an hour, and at the half hour's end he was quite aware that their talk had been very foolish. It had been quite harmless, no doubt, but still Hugh rather piqued himself now on having passed the age at which young men find it pleasant to talk nonsense to girls. To give him his due, indeed, he had wasted little of his time in that occupation since he had first known Dorothy. His

love for her had very early extinguished the taste in him for that kind of amusement.

But now he had been talking nonsense to Cicely Verner, and, though he felt a little ashamed of himself for having done it, still he could not but allow that he had found the doing of it rather entertaining. This girl with her lovely face, and her studied graces, and her evident desire to make a conquest of him, amused the young man not a little. He was in no danger, he thought, of being caught by her; but yet he had let her play with him, and he had responded to her play. It was a foolish amusement, he acknowledged: but, after all, where was the harm of it? Neither of them was taken in by the other; or, at least, if she on her side should think that he was more captivated with her than he was in reality, that was a blunder that would do harm to no one.

"They are certainly not people that I should care to have much to do with," he thought to himself when at last he had left the house; "and as for the girl, a man who did not know pretty well what he was about had better not meddle with her. To an inexperienced young fellow she would be terribly mischievous, I should think."

And then he went on musing about her as he walked home. He did not like her, he told himself unhesitatingly—he neither liked the daughter nor the mother; and yet, what a wonderfully pretty creature she was! "If she were not such a far-going flirt, she might be very fascinating," he thought. "But it is that mother who spoils her," he said to himself with exquisite justice. "All that is most objectionable in her, I believe, she owes to her mother. These unscrupulous, middle-aged widows are terrible." And

he began to think of Cicely with not a little pity, and more than once during the remainder of the day he recurred with undisguised regret to the reflection that it was hard for her not to be in better hands.

He felt so sorry that she was not in better hands, and he recalled her lovely face to his mind during the next few days so often, and with so much (perhaps wasted) sympathy for her, that when, one afternoon towards the end of the week, as he was sauntering through the rooms of the Academy, he accidentally perceived her there—the sight of her gave him a quick and unquestionable sense of pleasure. She was at some little distance from him when he saw her first, but he made his way straight to her, and, as he spoke to her, the bright and almost glad smile she gave him did not certainly make his own satisfaction in the meeting less. She was

with her mother, and a couple of men were with them too; but somehow—Hugh did not quite see how—she contrived in a very few moments to dismiss one of these cavaliers, and before three minutes had passed he found himself, half to his own amusement, threading his way through the crowd by her side, Mrs. Verner having been quietly left behind under the escort of her other friend.

"Come and look at Millais' landscape with me," she had said to him, and so they turned their steps towards Millais' landscape, and it took them a long time to reach it. They had to pass through two rooms before they came to it, and in these two rooms there were a great many other pictures about which it seemed Miss Verner was also anxious to hear Hugh's opinion or to deliver her own; therefore, their progress was unnecessarily slow.

But Hugh, perhaps, for his part, felt no special objection to its tardiness. It was pleasant enough to him to look at pictures with Cicely Verner: she was too pretty for him to be quite indifferent to such a companion; she made herself too agreeable for him not to be flattered a little by her evident desire to please him. The plainness of this desire amused rather than charmed him, it is true; but, nevertheless, in a certain degree, at least, he liked it.

They looked at a great many pictures, and talked about them: they reached Millais' landscape at last, and talked for some minutes of that, and then Cicely said she was tired, and, seeing an empty seat not far off, she proposed that they should sit down, and they sat down.

"I wonder where mamma is!" she exclaimed after this. "I think I must ask you to go and look for her presently, if

you will; but don't go yet. Colonel Wilcox is sure to take good care of her. Now that we have found a seat, I think we must rest for a little while." And so they rested, and she talked to him.

It was all very gay, light talk—mere badinage for the most part, but her beautiful face made the badinage graceful enough, and Hugh, as he listened to it, and responded to it, thought so more than once. Besides, if she chose to make eyes at him—well, the selection of him as an object worthy to be made eyes at deserved, perhaps, some little tribute of gratitude. And she was not all artificial and frivolous, he began to think; in the midst of her idle talk some grave word, once or twice, dropped from her lips; some momentary look of feeling came into her eyes and deepened them. "She might have been made a fine creature, I believe, with a different sort of up-bring-

ing. What a pity she has not had a kinder fate!" he began to think again, with more than his former pity for her.

They had been talking for a good while when, bearing down upon them from a little distance, they saw Mrs. Verner and Colonel Wilcox, and at this sight, Cicely rose with considerable alacrity to her feet.

"There is mamma," she said. "We had better go to her." And they went.

"Why, where have you been, Cicely?" Mrs. Verner exclaimed, as her daughter joined her. The elder lady seemed to be a little tired, and her usually smooth brow was slightly ruffled. "You have made me keep Colonel Wilcox such a long time from his friends."

"Not at all. Pray don't say so. It has been the greatest pleasure," the Colonel gallantly murmured.

And then Cicely made some little dexterous, but not quite honest, speech.

"I thought you were following us, mamma. We have been expecting to see you every minute. I hope Colonel Wilcox has not really been kept too long?" she said, looking with a very pretty smile into his face.

Hugh raised his eyebrows and stood silent. He was half-amused at the girl's ready falsehood, and yet he was sorry too to hear how glibly it rolled off her lips. She began next moment to talk in her gay light way to Colonel Wilcox, and they all stood in a group for a few moments, and then the other man left them; and, possibly, Hugh would have liked to leave them too, only he did not quite see his way to do so.

"I suppose you are ready to come away now, Cicely?" Mrs. Verner asked when the Colonel had gone.

"Oh, yes, quite ready," Cicely answered sweetly; and then, of course, Hugh went with them to hand them to their carriage.

He walked by Mrs. Verner's side as they made their way out of the rooms. He did not like Mrs. Verner, but he felt that during the last hour she had been rather cavalierly treated, and so he devoted himself for these few minutes to making his peace with her. They talked of the heat of the weather, and of the fatigue of exhibitions, and made remarks upon a few pictures as they passed; and by the time they had descended the staircase and reached her carriage she had become so much mollified that instead of shaking hands with Hugh: "Where are you going, Mr. Ludlow?" she asked him, when he had handed her to her seat. "We are going straight home. Come with us, and let us give you a cup of tea."

"Oh, yes, do!" chimed in Cicely, quickly.

She looked up at Hugh with her bright inviting eyes, and he, idly enough, responded to their invitation. He took his place in the carriage, and they drove to Chester Square.

It was five o'clock, and he drank his tea, and stayed and talked for an hour. The Verners' drawing-room was a pleasant enough one in which to lounge away part of an afternoon, and both mother and daughter were lively and cordial. Some other visitors came presently, and one of them—a very handsome and bright looking woman—began, after a while, to talk to him. She was Mrs. Linton, Cicely told him afterwards.

"Did you never meet her before? Her daughter is a great friend of your sister, you know," she said.

And then Hugh remembered, with an

inward laugh. Yes—Miss Linton was a friend of Phœbe's, whose tongue had talked to her of Cicely Verner, as Cicely, perhaps, would have winced a little to hear.

"You know Miss Linton too, do you not?" he quietly asked. "What sort of girl is she? I never saw her."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't care for her much," Cicely said. "She is not half as pleasant as her mother. She is very plain; and I suppose it makes girls sour to be plain."

"Very probably," Hugh replied.

"For my own part, I don't pretend that I get on with her," said Cicely frankly. "I like Mrs. Linton, but—no, certainly I don't like Sophia. You must tell me what you think of her when you see her."

"I dare say I shall agree with you," he said.

"Do you say that merely out of politeness?" she asked laughing.

"Not at all. I say it because of some things I have heard about her."

"I wonder what they are! Will you tell me?"

"No. I don't think I have any right to tell you. But they are nothing very serious. They are merely some things that she has said."

"Oh!"

And then Cicely became silent, and seemed to meditate.

"She does not like *me*, I know," she said after a few moments pause. "I daresay if you were ever to talk to her about me you would soon find that out."

"I don't think I am ever likely to talk to her about you."

"Oh, but you might, you know—and, if you should," hesitating a little, "I am

sure she would say some ill-natured things."

"Well, then, I shouldn't believe them."

"Would you not?" asked the girl quickly. She looked up to his face with rather an odd eagerness, Hugh thought, and her colour came. "I should not like you—you, or anyone—to judge me by what you heard from Sophia Linton," she said.

"Do you think I should be likely to do so?" he answered.

"I don't know. If she told you anything, how could you tell whether or not you ought to believe it?"

"If she told me anything about a stranger, I should not know whether or not to believe it perhaps; but, as far as you are concerned, I think I can judge for myself."

"I am glad you say that," she answered

instantly. "I should like you to judge me for yourself."

"I have no intention of doing anything else," he said.

"Will you tell me," after a little pause, "just one thing?"

"No," he said, interrupting her, and laughing a little, "I won't tell you anything."

"You won't tell me if you have heard anything she says about me already?"

"I won't talk any more to you about her at all."

"Then I know you *have* heard something," she said very quietly.

But, though she spoke quietly, she flushed again, and after a moment, with a look that he had not seen before in her face,

"I don't know what sort of things you may have heard," she said in a

clear keen tone, "and I am not going to ask; only I say this one thing to you—I am not what Sophia Linton thinks me. What I am may not be very good—that is another matter. All I mean is that she knows little enough either of the good or the evil in me."

"I can believe that very well," Hugh said gravely, hiding his surprise. "But, I assure you, you need not tell me this. What Miss Linton may say or think of you can never influence me in the slightest degree."

She made no answer to this. The colour was still in her face, and she was roused to a curious degree—roused so much that there were something very like tears in her eyes.

"What you say is very kind," she replied after a little silence: "and I almost think I believe you," she added quickly,

"for men are juster and more charitable than women are. Why are men always the most charitable, I wonder? If I were to do something wrong I should not like to be judged by a jury of women," she said with a sudden laugh.

Before he could speak again there was a movement in the room, and Mrs. Linton, who had been sitting near Mrs. Verner, rose to go. Then—as their talk had been disturbed—after a few moments Hugh took his leave also.

"It has been quite a pleasant afternoon. I liked our hour amongst the pictures so much," Cicely said, with the frankest and simplest smile as she gave him her hand.

She had quite recovered herself then; her eyes were dry, and her momentary emotion had entirely vanished, and Hugh bade her good bye, and went away, thinking that she was a curious study—a girl

who was interesting at any rate, whatever might be her faults.

It happened that Hugh Ludlow did not mention at his own house that he had been twice to see the Verners; but two or three days after his second call there came a note to him from Mrs. Verner, inviting him to dinner, and this note he did show to his mother and Phœbe.

"You surely won't go, Hugh?" Phœbe said instantly, when she had read it.

"Why should I not go?" he demanded rather quickly.

"Because they are not nice people—really they are not. I am sure it can't do you any good to know them."

"My dear Phœbe," and Hugh gave a laugh, "do you suppose that I don't know how to take care of myself? One

would think to hear you that I was a little boy—and that the Verners were a pair of ogres."

"No, no, Hugh—I don't see that," Mrs. Ludlow interposed a little gravely. "By all accounts these people are not desirable acquaintances—for you, or anyone. Your father has told you what he thinks of Mrs. Verner, and what is said about her daughter you hear from Phœbe. I cannot for my own part think it would be an advisable thing for you to be going to their house."

"I think, mother, you must allow me to choose my own friends," the young man said, a little stiffly.

"Of course I can't prevent you from choosing your own friends; but at the same time, Hugh, you must allow me the liberty, when I disapprove of your friends, of at least expressing my disapproval. I should be glad if you did not become

intimate with the Verners—that is all I say."

"I have no intention of becoming intimate with them," Hugh exclaimed rather hotly. "You know very well that I care for them little enough. The mother is a hateful kind of woman, and the daughter is—well, perhaps only a few degrees better; but still I don't see why you are to be rude to people when they treat you civilly."

"I think I would rather be what you call rude to them than go and eat their dinners, and then abuse them behind their backs," said Phœbe with severity.

And then to that speech Hugh made no reply, but he went presently to his own room, and wrote an acceptance of the Verners' invitation. Perhaps he was not particularly pleased with himself as he wrote it; possibly even, had nothing been said to him, his note might have contained

a refusal and not an acceptance; but Phœbe's opposition had had its usual effect of making him antagonistic, and so he assured Mrs. Verner that it would give him great pleasure to dine with her: and when the day appointed for the dinner came, he presented himself in Chester Square.

As he drove to his destination he was conscious of a certain amount of dissatisfaction with himself for what he was doing, and yet, mingled with that dissatisfaction, was an unquestionable curiosity to see Cicely again. She was so pretty that he wanted to see her, he told himself, as he might want to see a picture. As a woman he did not care for her, but as a thing to look at—yes, certainly, he allowed, he admired her. Besides, he wanted to see her again, that he might make up his mind whether she looked best by daylight

or candlelight. With which important object in view he made his entrance into Mrs. Verner's drawing-room.

It was a small dinner party of merely half a dozen persons. Hugh found that the only guests besides himself were a couple of men and a single lady, who was neither very young, nor very handsome. To one of these men Cicely was talking when he entered the room, and she continued her conversation, merely pausing for a moment to give Hugh her hand. Then he was introduced to the lady whom he did not know, and when dinner was announced he found that he was expected to take her into the dining-room. This, perhaps, was not quite what he anticipated, especially too as his place at the table proved to be removed as far as possible from Cicely's.

He sat between Mrs. Verner and Miss

Rushton; but Miss Rushton was dull, and seemed mainly intent upon her dinner; and Mrs. Verner was gracious indeed, as usual, but, as usual, too, Hugh did not like her. So the entertainment proceeded, and Hugh did not enjoy himself very greatly, till after a time the talk became general. Then it was pleasant enough. Cicely, too, was looking very handsome; and Hugh had this question to decide of whether or not she looked best by candlelight.

The men sat only a very short time over their wine, and consequently they were all for a good while again in the drawing-room together. But the evening was almost drawing to an end before Hugh had any talk alone with Cicely. For nearly an hour after they returned upstairs he found that no appropriation of her to himself was possible. Why he should have felt any desire to appropriate

her to himself he perhaps could hardly have explained with any clearness, had he been asked the question, but undoubtedly he had begun to feel, and even to be conscious that he had begun to feel, a certain sense of having been treated by her as she should not have treated him, when at last, as he was half vaguely contemplating leaving the house in dudgeon, she came to where he was standing alone, and placed herself at his side.

"What are you doing? Are you looking at these photographs?" she said, abruptly. "Why don't you come and talk to me? I think you have hardly said one word to me all night."

"Well—that is a curious charge to make!" he exclaimed, turning on her rather quickly. "What chance have I had of saying anything to you?"

"I don't know. Have you not had

the same chance that anybody else has had?"

"Certainly not!" he said. "The others have been talking to you all night."

"Well, do you talk to me now; and don't look so cross. One would think you had never heard before of poor women being obliged to be civil to people they did not care about."

There was a little couch close by, in the elbowed corner of which she placed herself as she spoke, leaving room for him, if he chose, to sit beside her.

"Did you never hear of that?" she asked again, laughing, and looking at him.

"Yes, very often. Only I don't at all suppose that this has been your case to-night."

"Don't you? But you *may* suppose it," half below her breath.

"I should say you had been enjoying yourself very fairly."

"I wanted mamma to let me go in with you to dinner," abruptly, "but she wouldn't do it."

"Why not?" he asked, rather taken aback.

"Because those other two are older than you are, and—" laughing—"more important. I had to promise to be civil to them."

"Well, I think you have found it very easy to fulfil your promise."

"Perhaps I have; but one may find things easy enough, and yet prefer to be doing something else."

"And what else do you mean to tell me that you have wanted to do? Do you mean——" Hugh felt a sudden reckless desire to force her to say something to him which yet, with his whole heart, at the same time, he knew that he had no

right to make her say—"Do you mean to try and make me believe that you have wanted to talk to *me?*"

"No, I am not going to try to make you believe anything. If you like to be sceptical, you are quite at liberty to be sceptical."

"But if I don't want to be sceptical? If I only want to be convinced?"

"Then be convinced."

"That you have been wanting to talk to me?"

"I don't think I—quite—said that; did I?"

"No, you haven't said it yet, but I am asking you to say it."

"Why?"

"Because I want it to be true."

And then she laughed.

"I think you are very exacting," she said. "Perhaps I like to talk to you; perhaps not. I am not going to tell you."

"Will nothing make you tell me?"

"Nothing. Do you think I can tell all my likings to you, when I have only known you for such a little time?"

"When shall you have known me long enough to tell them to me? In another week?"

"In a week! No, neither in a week, nor a month, nor perhaps a year—unless I see a great deal more of you than I am at all likely to do."

"How do you know how much you are likely to see of me? I am afraid your wish there is father to your thought."

"Is it, do you suppose? Oh no; I don't know that it is."

"You don't know? Is that all you can say?"

"I don't think I feel any special objection, at present, to seeing you. I might

feel differently, of course, if I knew you better."

"You might dislike me more then, you mean?"

"Exactly. I don't—particularly—dislike you now."

"Do you expect me to express gratitude for that declaration?"

"Well, I don't know. You might be a little grateful, I think."

"For being assured that I am not absolutely hateful to you?"

"Yes—because you might be very hateful. Some people are. A good many people, even."

"Why have you so much objection to your fellow-creatures?"

"I have no objection to them when they are nice; but so many of them are *not* nice. So many people bore one."

"Do *I* bore you?"

"I don't think that is a fair question."

"Is it not? But I want you to answer it."

"In order that I may give food to your vanity?"

"No; but in order that you may guide my decision."

"What decision?"

"About whether or not I shall see you any more."

She was taken by surprise, and her eyes opened wide for a moment; but she recovered herself again instantly.

"Were you thinking of not seeing me any more?"

"Yes, I was thinking of it."

"Because of that innocent remark of mine? Because I said people were often bores?"

"Yes—for that reason, perhaps, mainly. For that—and others."

"Tell me some of the others?"

"No."

"Then I can't tell you what you asked either. You must discover the answer for yourself." And she rose up laughing.

"Why are you going away already?" he asked her.

"Because I must talk to Miss Rushton."

"Pray leave Miss Rushton alone. I am sure she does not want to be talked to."

"You are quite wrong. I am a great favourite of Miss Rushton's, and she wants me a great deal more than anybody else does."

"That is one of your arbitrary assertions. How many arbitrary assertions you make on matters about which you have no means of judging!"

"I should call that an arbitrary asser-

tion on your part. Do you know, I think you are very arrogant?"

"I? Not in the least!"

"Indeed you are. Very arrogant, and dogmatic, and over-bearing."

"You are giving me a pleasant character."

"But are you not very masterful?"

"No, certainly not."

"Then why do you always make me feel as if you were?"

"I don't think I can make you feel that."

"Oh, but you do—every time I see you. And I don't like masterful people. They frighten me."

"Then you have let the truth out at last, and you *do* hate me?"

"I must go and talk to Miss Rushton."

"Not for another minute. Not till you have answered my question."

"Well, but I can't answer it. I have told you all I know. You do frighten me —a little."

"And you don't like to be frightened?"

"No."

"Then you would like best to have nothing more to do with me?"

"No; I should like best to conquer my fear."

She was looking him full in the face as she said this. She smiled a little, and the colour came a little to her cheek.

"But you can't conquer it, unless you see something more of me?"

"No,—I suppose not."

"Therefore you are willing to do that?"

"Mr. Ludlow, I know you were meant to be a lawyer, for you are so horribly fond of cross examining people. Go and gratify your taste upon some-

body else, for I won't answer another question!"

They both laughed, and she went away, and ten minutes after this Hugh had bidden his hostesses good-night.

The evening had not been a satisfactory one; he was vexed with himself, and was honest enough to confess that he was vexed, and that he was conscious he had been talking to Cicely as he had better not have talked. "She is the kind of girl who makes a man behave like a fool," he told himself angrily; and then he allowed that, since she made him behave like a fool, it would be wisest for him to see no more of her.

As he went on his way home he tried to turn his thoughts from Miss Verner, and to fix them instead on Dorothy, but though he tried he was well aware that his efforts failed. Dorothy's image seemed like some pale image in the distance,

eclipsed and almost blotted out by that other dazzling figure. He could not think of her, nor dwell on what she was to him, nor gain strength to sweep Cicely out of his brain by remembering her goodness or her sweetness.

He knew that he had been spending the evening in an unhealthy atmosphere—that he had been acting and feeling as he had no right either to feel or act, and he was brave and manly enough to say to himself that what had been done to-night should not be done any more. "A man might as soon take to dram drinking as to flirting with such a woman," he frankly told himself. "Even if I were free I should be a fool to do it; as it is, I should be more than a fool; I should be a scoundrel."

"And yet, what a beautiful creature she is!" he exclaimed a moment afterwards. "I don't believe she has no heart,

poor girl. She may be faulty enough, I daresay in many ways, but I do think there is a soul in her to be touched, if the right person could be found to touch it. Only I must not be the one to try," he told himself hastily. "She tempts one to make the experiment most horribly; but I shall be madder than I am, if I yield to the temptation."

And then he tried once more to steady his mind by thinking of Dorothy; but it was useless. "She does look best by candlelight undoubtedly," he was saying to himself again before another minute had passed.

CHAPTER IV.

IT rather troubled Hugh that he must go again to the Verners' house, and for a day or two he debated greatly in his mind whether he should call, or merely leave his card. His secret wishes prompted him to call, that he might see Cicely once more, and perhaps by the aid of sober daylight, recover from the feverish effects of his last meeting with her—and yet in his heart he knew that it would be better that he should not see her again.

"I will take my chance," he said to himself at last. "Most likely when I go they will not be at home; but, if they should be, I will go in for a quarter of an hour, and then that shall be the end of it."

So he went to Chester Square one afternoon, and the servant said that Mrs. Verner was at home.

Mrs. Verner was not in the drawing-room when Hugh was ushered into it, but Cicely was there alone, and Hugh was startled when he found how his heart quickened its beating as he saw her.

"It must have been some happy instinct that prevented me from going out to-day," the girl said, meeting him with a bright look, that seemed as if it could only come from pleasure, in her face. "I did not expect you in the very least, but yet I felt so lazy that I determined to stay at home."

"That is fortunate for me," Hugh said.

"Is it? I don't know that you will think that presently when you find how good for nothing I am to-day. And you will have nobody too but me to talk to for half-an-hour, for mamma is not very well, and is lying down. Do you think you can be content just to sit here, and amuse me for that length of time?"

"I know that I shall be very content to sit here; whether I may succeed in amusing you is another matter," Hugh said.

"Well, you can talk to me at least. I don't know why I said that I wanted you to amuse me—except that one so often says stupid things. And, as I told you just now, I am very stupid to-day. I think I only want to be talked to, and—and made to forget myself,"

the girl said suddenly, with all at once a curious weary look in her face.

She seemed to be out of spirits, and she talked to Hugh for ten minutes in a very quiet way. There was something in her sadness and her want of vivacity that touched him; in the mood in which he was himself to-day perhaps her depression moved him more than her usual liveliness and brilliancy would have done; her face, with its shade of melancholy over it, seemed to him to have gained a new charm.

"You say that Mrs. Verner is not well to-day; I think that you are not well either?" he said to her abruptly after a little while.

"Oh yes, I am. I am always well," she answered quickly. "But I told you you would find me stupid, and you do, you see. I have been stupid all day."

"You have been out of spirits, you mean?"

"Well, you may call it being out of spirits, if you like. It does not matter much about a name. People seldom call things by their right names, I think. I wonder how it would feel to live in a world that did—a world where people were all natural, and spoke the truth," Cicely said, with a sudden jarring laugh. "We don't speak the truth here, you know—or almost pretend to speak it."

"I am sure *you* speak the truth often—do you not?" he asked her, not quite knowing how to reply to this unexpected speech.

"No. I don't think I do," she answered at once. "I feel sometimes as if I did not know what truth was. Everything seems so made up, and artificial, and false. Yes, you are amazed

at me for speaking like this," she said suddenly, looking up at him. "I know you are, and in some moods I should be amazed at myself, but I get so tired of it all sometimes. Do you never get tired? But I suppose I need not ask. You have had such a happy life—have you not? You have always had work to do, and there is no pretence and lying about that. I think it is much harder for girls like me, than it is for men."

"Yes, I think that is true, too; but how can it be helped?" he asked quickly. "You cannot do the rough work of the world, you know. I hope I may never see you try to do it."

"Oh no, I don't want to do rough work. I don't suppose I should like to do almost any work—now," she said bitterly. "I hate work, and sometimes I get sick to death of play; that is how the case

It is always embarrassing to be enthusiastically thanked for performing a service that we are quite unconscious of having in the slightest degree performed. Miss Verner had chosen to pour out her sorrows to Hugh, but Hugh knew, as well as he knew anything in the world, that the hesitating words which had dropped from his lips could scarcely, by the most generous interpretation, be supposed to have given her any valuable advice on the right way of bearing them. He knew this as well as he had ever known anything in his life; and yet when she thanked him for his help with those eager lips and eloquent looks of hers, what could he say to her? How could he be ungracious enough to refuse her offered gratitude? If he had been a free man, perhaps, he would not have had even much wish to refuse it. He might still, under such circumstances,

have disclaimed any right to it; but he would have been willing enough, possibly, to have accepted it, and to have allowed himself, without much hesitation (even in spite of his small fitness for the office), to be installed as father confessor to so fair a penitent; but he was not a free man; and, confused, and excited, and tempted as he was, Hugh still, at least, retained recollection of that fact, and his recollection of it made him wish, almost with a sense of terror, that he was safely out of the house. He was being put through an ordeal that was almost too much for him, and there was no help left for him that he could see save in flight.

But Miss Verner had evidently no intention of letting him fly yet. She sat, placidly regarding him with her lovely eyes; and he knew that, let what might be still in store for him, he could not yet rise from his seat.

"You know you must not be afraid of me, and think that I am always going to be troubling you like this," she said to him sweetly after a few moments' silence. "I have been dreadfully weak and foolish to-day; but I hope I shall not be so weak again for a long time. I am not going to be silly, and to cry, and to vex you any more—either to-day, or, I trust, for many other days. But I want you to go on helping me, you know; and you will do that—won't you? You will try to make me better? You will come and talk to me, and—be my friend?"

"Certainly, I will be your friend, if you will let me," he replied. How could he possibly make any other answer?

"Thank you so much for saying that! You make me feel as if I had gained so much!" she exclaimed earnestly. "You will think me very foolish, I am afraid; but, indeed, I do want a friend—a wise,

kind friend—so terribly. No poor girl in this big London, I think, wants one more than I do. I have neither brother nor sister, you know; and mamma—mamma is very kind in her way, no doubt—only—" And then Cicely sighed, and hung her head, and broke off her sentence.

"Yes, I understand," murmured Hugh, with the deepest sympathy.

"It seems dreadful to complain of one's own mother; but she does not help me. I won't say anything more than that."

"No—don't say more. It will only distress you. I know what you mean," Hugh ejaculated hurriedly.

"I envy other people so sometimes; people who seem so happy with one another. Tell me about *your* mother—will you?" said the girl suddenly, looking up again to him. "Do you love her? Is she very good?"

"She is one of the best mothers in the world," Hugh answered warmly. "She is one in a thousand. I wish you knew her."

"Ah!" said Cicely, with a little sigh, "I wish I did."

"She would be of more use to you—far more use—than I can ever hope to be."

"Do you think that? Well, I don't know," rather dubiously. And then, with a sudden bright smile, "you see I am content to trust in *you*."

"But I am afraid I shall disappoint you."

"Oh no," still smiling. "I have no fear of that."

"You are very good to me," with extreme uneasiness.

"It is only the truth. And I ought to tell the truth. Were you not teaching me that just now? You ought to praise me

for being so quick to learn my lesson. I shall trust you till I find that you fail me. Is not that the best thing I can do?"

"It is the kindest, certainly. Whether it is the wisest," said the poor young man, "is perhaps another question."

"Not to me. With me, where I give liking I must give trust as well. And you?"—with all at once a quick look into his face. "You do not think, I hope, that you can be my friend, and yet doubt me?"

"Why should you suspect me of doubting you?" Hugh said gravely. He forced himself to look steadily at her. "Certainly, as you say, friends should not doubt each other."

"Then we both understand?" she said, "and we are both agreed?"

("Agreed! Good heavens, about what?" cried Hugh to himself, with a cold current running down his back.)

But just at this moment there came the sound of a hand upon the door, and Miss Verner's quick ear caught it, and in a hurried whisper—"Hush! there is mamma!" she cried, and quick as lightning she slid to the farther end of the sofa on which she was seated, and her whole manner underwent an instantaneous change.

"Have you been to the opera lately? I have not been for more than a fortnight," she was saying quite simply and carelessly when Mrs. Verner came into the room.

Had she been acting? Had the whole of this scene that she had played before him been merely a scene got up deliberately? Hugh asked himself when he had at last made his escape from the house; but, though he was inexpressibly annoyed by what had happened, and embarrassed beyond all present power

of seeing his way out of his embarrassment, yet his answer to this question was an impulsive and almost impetuous denial. No, he could not believe that there had been no genuineness in her emotion; her appeal to him, however unwise it might have been, was at least, he assured himself, the appeal of a woman who for the moment had let her heart speak, and who had felt, as she had professed to feel, the loneliness and the frivolity of her life.

There had been no acting, he said, in that distress of hers. Possibly she had acted a little afterwards — he could not be sure of that; but, with his heart beating fast, he told himself that her tears had been real, that her weariness was real, that her regard for and trust in him were not only realities, but realities that were becoming to him almost terrible. How was he to go on seeing her now, with

this compact between them that she had pleaded with him to let her make, and yet continue true to Dorothy?

"I cannot do it," he said to himself. "If we go on meeting after this, it can only end in one way, and in that way it must never end. Shall I tell her about Dorothy? I must tell her about Dorothy, it seems to me, or else I must not see her any more."

As it was, he had parted from her telling her that he should see her again soon. He had not done this voluntarily, but as he was bidding her good-bye she had contrived to say two or three words to him.

"When will you come again?" she had asked him, having first gone to a little distance from her mother, and placed herself so that Mrs. Verner could not see her face; and, compelled by his position, —having no power to utter more than a

single sentence—"Very soon; as soon as I can," he had replied.

Since, therefore, he had said this to her, should he, as he had promised, go back soon, and tell her about Dorothy?

He could see nothing else that it seemed possible for him to do. Either by spoken or written word it appeared to him that he must tell her of his engagement. He must tell her of it, and must confess at the same time that he was not strong enough to accept the friendship she had offered him.

"Perhaps it will be easier to write this than to speak it," he said to himself. "I must consider the matter carefully, but if I can write it, it will be best, I think. Poor thing! tell her how I may, it will give her pain. She has so few friends, she said, and she seemed so glad to make a friend of me. I might have been of

some use to her too. I do believe there is the making in her of a noble woman. Poor girl! poor girl!" he said, with a great rush of tenderness and anguish.

It was hard, and indeed almost impossible, for Hugh during the rest of this day to think of anything but Cicely. Again and again he went over their strange interview; he recalled her words, and tones, and looks. What did they all mean? Did they mean merely that she offered him friendship? or was she ready to give something beyond that? With a terrible persistence, some voice within kept whispering to him—"You could make her love you if you liked."

Yes, but he had no power to do it; he dared not try; he had no right. "My poor Dorothy!" he said sadly and remorsefully. He felt as if he were false to Dorothy, even when he knew that he was struggling to be true. He knew that it

was not the thought of her that was making his pulses beat to-day.

Before he went to bed he tried to write the letter to Cicely that he had comtemplated, but he made effort after effort, and none pleased him. "I shall be cooler to-morrow; I shall do it better then," he said to himself at last; but when the next day came he found his task no easier. Besides—he began to think—suppose his letter were written, how could he get it sent to her? He might embarrass her greatly if her mother should become aware that she had received a private letter from him, and was it not most probable that Mrs. Verner would become aware of it? "Whatever I do I must not compromise her," he began to tell himself earnestly. "It may be necessary—it may be the only thing that I can do—to see her again."

He spent a day or two in questioning

with himself what course it would be best for him to take, and inevitably during this day or two he kept the thought of Cicely constantly before him. He meditated on his position with regard to her pretty well morning, noon, and night, and, in the course of these meditations, he became startlingly aware that his desire to be once more with her was growing more and more intense. He told himself always that he was resolved, if they met again at all, that they should meet only once; but for this parting interview he began to long with an almost feverish eagerness. Again and again he inwardly rehearsed what he would say to her: again and again he imagined himself once more beside her, and in prospect, saw her fair face, and heard her voice.

But, after all this expenditure of thought and sentiment upon her, it gave Hugh Ludlow a very curious sensation

when, threading his way one afternoon through the throng of people near Hyde Park Corner, at the hour when the drive was full of carriages, his eyes fell suddenly on the figure of Miss Verner, seated amongst the lookers-on, with her chair a little drawn back from the crowd, and talking, with her sweetest smile upon her lips, to a man who sat beside her, and whom Hugh knew by name as one of the emptiest-headed young noblemen in London. She was talking, and so absorbed in her conversation that she never saw Hugh, though he stood leaning against the railing not six paces from her. She was wholly engaged in charming her companion, in turning eloquent looks upon him, in fascinating him with words that seemed half-playful, half-tender.

Ought this sight to have mattered to Hugh? I am afraid he did not pause to consider whether it should matter to him

or not; but, after standing watching her for a few minutes, he yielded to a sudden impulse, and all at once passed close before her; and, as she glanced up then and saw him, he merely raised his hat, with grave and stiff politeness, and moved on, with an imperturbable expression on his face, but in his heart a feeling of fury that dismayed him.

out, hardly knowing what he said. "Do you think I am suffering nothing too? You ought to help me—you ought to teach me how to give you up—not to do this—not to pour fire upon me, as you are doing now. Help me, for I need help. It is harder for me than it is for you," he said.

He had bent towards her; with his last words, in his agitation, he took her hand, and, with a thrill that made him suddenly dumb, he felt her fingers close softly over his. Then neither of them spoke again for a minute; they merely sat hand in hand, without speaking, or letting their eyes meet.

It was she again who was the first to break the silence. With a sigh, as if she was passing out of a dream, she presently withdrew her hand, and looked up in his face.

"We must not be foolish; this is being

very foolish," she said half below her breath. "Oh no—we two could never be anything to one another—that was always out of the question. We are nothing but friends. And if—if you are engaged to somebody else—why, that is really better—is it not?" she said with a sudden smile, "for then we shall not make mistakes, or be silly, or spoil our friendship. It was I who was so stupid just now, and upset you, and I am so sorry for it. Things sometimes, you know, for a moment startle one, and I was very selfish; for a moment I did not like to think that some one else—some other woman—" with another little tremor in her voice. "Oh, I am so stupidly weak to-day! We won't speak of it any more. I shall be quite strong again soon—quite strong," she said, with rather a piteous little laugh.

He made no answer to all this; they

had both been silent again for a little while before he spoke any more to her.

"Do you think that it has not been a kind of agony to me to know you?" he began to say to her at last in a passionate tone. "You are the sort of woman whom one meets only once in a life time. If I had not been bound, what would it not be for me now to feel that I might have you to live for! I say this to you to-day, knowing that I must never say it to you again. I tell you that if at this moment I could be free, I should thank God. But now I must go away from you."

"Go away!" she echoed in a surprised voice; her eyes opened; she looked altogether amazed. "Go away! Oh, Mr. Ludlow, you must not do that!" she said.

"How can I stay?" he asked her half aloud.

"Why should you not? Why should I lose you as a friend, because—because of that other girl? I do not want to take you from her. I know I was jealous of her for a moment—but—there—that is all over. I only want us to be friends now. You must not go—you must not go, indeed! I shall feel, if you do, as though you had left me to my fate."

"You must not speak so," he said in great distress.

"But I have been trusting you so. I have been counting on you more than you can tell. If you give me up—if you give me up—you leave me to myself—and I cannot tell what may become of me!"

"You do not know what you are doing," he said, speaking with difficulty. "You are tempting me more than I can bear."

"Then, if I am, I am glad," she answered instantly. "I do not want to take you from that girl. Why should I want to do that? I am not going either to take you, or to try to take you; but is she to be everything to you, because you are going to marry her? are you to have no other friends even before you marry? She must be an exacting woman if she demands that."

"If we could be merely friends, do you think I would not be only too glad to go on seeing you?" he said.

"But we will be merely friends. I do not want anything else. I shall be quite content with that. I only want you to come and talk to me sometimes, and advise me and help me a little—just gravely and quietly—don't you understand? as you would help me if I were your sister, and I asked you. Surely she would not mind us being like brother

and sister?" said Cicely, with surprised, wide-opened eyes.

"We cannot be like brother and sister," he answered hastily.

"But why do you say that? Do you think I would ask you to go on seeing me if I felt that there was anything wrong in it? Oh, indeed I would not! But it is just because I feel so sure that it would not be wrong," exclaimed Cicely earnestly—"because I feel that we understand one another now as we did not do before—that I ask you so frankly to come. You see, I may tell you quite plainly now how much I care for your friendship," said Miss Verner, with a cordial smile, forgetting apparently at the moment that the amount of reticence she had exercised hitherto on this point had hardly ever been very great. "You won't misunderstand me now, as you might have done a little while ago. Do you

know," she said cheerfully, "I am beginning to feel quite pleased about your engagement, for, instead of it separating us, I really think it ought only to make us the better friends—it ought to put us on such a comfortable footing with one another. Don't you know what I mean? Don't you think I am right?"

But he made no answer.

"I wish you would tell me something more about her," she said softly, after a few moments' silence. "You have not even told me her name yet. What is it?"

"Why should you care to know?" he answered almost angrily.

"Because I am interested in her. Do you mean to say that you won't tell me?" she said in a tone of surprise.

"Do you suppose it is easy for me to talk to you about her?" he asked suddenly and sharply.

"I don't know why it should not be. I think it would be, if you would let yourself do it. Please tell me a little more, for I should so like to know. Do tell me her name?"

And then, at last, he told her, though he did it ungraciously and curtly, with a strong feeling of reluctance.

"Dorothy Wilmot," he said.

"Oh, what a nice old-fashioned name!" she exclaimed instantly. "And is she herself quaint and old-fashioned too? Is she pretty?"

"I don't know that you would call her so," he said coldly.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "Because you think I have such bad taste. Now I call that unkind."

"I beg your pardon. I have no wish to be unkind."

"Then you should not seem—so—cross."

"I am not cross. You misunderstand me entirely."

"I am so interested in your engagement, and you won't tell me anything."

"Can you not see," he exclaimed, and suddenly looked her steadily in the face, "that you are the last person living to whom it would be easy to me to talk of Miss Wilmot?"

"No, I don't see that," she answered at once. "I don't think it ought to be difficult, and I don't think it would be difficult, if you would try to do it."

He sat looking gloomily on the ground after she had said this. Perhaps in all his life Hugh had never been less satisfied with himself than he was at this moment. He knew that he was false to Dorothy, and yet, though he had become false to Dorothy, he was not true to this other woman by whose side he sat now. He had been hurried by the passion of the

moment to speak words to Cicely Verner that ought to have constituted him her lover; but now he was wretched because he had spoken these words. It seemed to him that he had only half meant them, or that the feeling that had prompted them had been so momentary and mad a one that he was ashamed already to remember how he had yielded to it. She had moved him by the exhibition of her own emotion, till, for a few minutes, he had almost believed that she loved him; but now he had ceased already to believe that she loved him, and, as she sat putting her easy questions to him, he was already beginning to tell himself that she was a mere actress—one of the women sent on earth to drive men to their destruction.

He rose up suddenly after a little silence from his seat, and put out his hand to her.

"Let me go away," he said abruptly.

"Why do you say that again?" she exclaimed in a tone of mingled surprise and disappointment. "Oh, no! I do not want you to go yet." She too rose hurriedly, and looked in a distressed way into his face. "Are you angry with me?" she timidly asked.

"Angry? No: what could I be angry about?" he answered almost roughly.

"I think you must be angry, or you would not say you were going—like this. Something must have vexed you, I know. Have I been teasing you with my questions? If I have, I won't ask any more; only don't go away—don't go yet." And the tears, as she pleaded with him, came to her eyes.

He stood without answering her for a few moments. He still held out the hand to her that she had not taken. He gave one glance at her face, and then turned his own face away.

"You are wrong to ask me to stay," he said to her in a low voice. "That *you* would not find it difficult to go on seeing me, I can well understand; but what is easy for you may be impossible for me. I hardly know—after what you have heard me say to-day—how far you can be in earnest in proposing that we should still meet as friends; but if you have really thought that we can do that—I mean, that I, on my part, can do it—I can only tell you," he said almost contemptuously, "that you are looking at the matter with the eyes and the understanding of a child. My feeling for you, however temporary a one it may be—and I trust in God!" cried Hugh, with sudden passion, "that it is temporary—is not, if it be anything in this world, the feeling of a friend."

"But it may become so," she said eagerly.

She put her hand in his all at once, perhaps because she saw no other way of detaining him.

"It will never become so by my continuing to see you," he replied.

"Ah, but you do not know that! You cannot tell."

"If a man does not want to be burnt, does he walk straight into the fire?" Hugh asked, with a bitter laugh.

He dropped her hand, though she would apparently have allowed him to keep it longer, and took up his hat; but when he had taken his hat he looked at her again, and that parting look made it hard for him to carry out his resolution to go away, for he found her eyes fixed on his, and swimming in tears, and her lips parted and quivering.

He stood still for a moment, agitated and irresolute, and then she broke into a little cry.

"Oh, I did not think you would have treated me like this! I wanted your help so, and I thought you were sorry for me!" she said, and all at once she sank down again on the sofa, from which she had risen, and, with a sob, hid her face upon the cushions.

And then there was silence in the room, except for her crying, an unbroken silence for about the space of ten seconds; at the end of which time Hugh turned his face to the door, and suddenly made a dive at it, and found himself in another minute out in the street, feeling more like a scoundrel and a coward than he had ever felt before in all his life.

CHAPTER VI.

IF Hugh Ludlow had been conscious of having stolen Mrs. Verner's spoons, his sensations as he walked out of Chester Square could hardly have been more wretched. He had escaped from Cicely, yet scarcely had he escaped when he despised himself for having done it; he felt as if the instinct of self-preservation that had prompted him to fly had been an instinct of miserable cowardice. It was true that he had fled in a desperate effort to be true to Dorothy; but, at this moment, he was in

the mood to ask himself bitterly what was the good of being true in act to Dorothy, when in his heart he had ceased to have any love for her. For he knew that during these feverish days he had not loved her, that his love, which, perhaps, had long been cooling, had become cold as an extinguished fire since he had known Miss Verner. Till now he had tried manfully to be loyal to her; had he not been loyal till at last his loyalty had made him a horror to himself?

At the corner of the Square he stood still, and had almost retraced his steps, and it was not any thought of Dorothy then that kept him from making his way back to Cicely. It was only an instinctive, half-acknowledged distrust of her. He told himself that he had been a coward for stealing away from her as he had done, but yet, in his heart, he knew that

if he went back to her he should be a fool. So, though he stood still for a few seconds, and even turned his face again towards the house, in the end he did not go back.

Yet he was very unhappy, and miserably at war with himself as he finally walked away. It was not a small thing to Hugh to feel that he had treated any woman as he had treated Cicely Verner—to know that he had refused an appeal for help made to him by a woman with tears in her eyes. In all his life he had never done such a thing before, and all that was tender and chivalrous in his nature rose in arms to denounce his act and reproach him for it. It seemed to him as if it was hardly any excuse that he had done it unwillingly; he told himself that the fear which had made him fly from her was a thing as despicable as the act itself.

"If I had had any manliness left, I should have stayed with her," he said to himself, "no matter what the cost or the embarrassment might be to myself. She had called on me to help her, and what does that man deserve who, when a woman calls on him for help, turns his back on her, and skulks away like a thief?"

In this sort of way, being in a highly excited and imaginative state, it pleased Hugh to go on talking during the next few hours. He was too much upset to allow himself to listen to reason, too remorseful at what he had done to permit himself to believe that it had been right to do it. He had been a brute and a coward; these were the two designations that it almost seemed to give him a certain satisfaction to apply to himself, levelling them at his head every few minutes, as he might have flung a couple of stones.

For the time he had almost put Dorothy out of his thoughts (perhaps because he could not remember her without a kind of rage, as the root of all that had happened, the real cause, however innocent the poor girl might be, why he had treated Cicely so cruelly), and all his consideration was for the woman whom he had left in her trouble. If he could but have got rid of that instinctive doubt he had of her, if he could but have been wholly certain that during their interview this morning she had not been playing with him, undoubtedly before the day was ended he would have made his way again to Chester Square to obtain her pardon. But, happily for himself, his faith in her, through all his self-reproach, remained unsteady, and this feeling that he could not trust her became the fortunate barrier that stayed his steps.

And so this day passed, and another came, and then Hugh began a little to recover himself, and to be able to perceive, to some small extent at least, that, however despicably he had behaved yesterday, perhaps it might be better to bear his self-contempt (all things considered), and not to go back to Cicely, and put himself again into her power. For while he was with her he had a hard matter, as he knew, to keep himself his own master; and if he loved her, he knew too that he only loved her against his will. If he were to go back to her and beg for her forgiveness, he should put himself into a position from which he was well aware it would not be easy for him to extricate himself again.

So this next day he told himself that he would not go back to her, but would leave London, and not see her any more. He would leave London and go abroad

for a few months, and try to forget her, and—to remember Dorothy. He felt very contrite towards Dorothy with this new day; a love that has flown will not come back with a wish, but loyalty, at least, may come back if we strive to bring it, and he told himself once more that he would do his best to put Cicely out of his thoughts, and that then, when he had won his battle, he would go straight to Llanwyck and make Dorothy his wife.

Yes, he would do this, he said; it was the only right and manly course to take; and yet—he suddenly thought—suppose Cicely loved him? Suppose that she loved him, and that there had been no acting yesterday in her tears—in that case what, in Heaven's name, ought he to do?

He told himself that for Dorothy, perhaps, as well as for him, the life might

nearly have gone out of that old pledge by which she had bound herself to him; and then he thought of Cicely, and all the witchery of her looks and words, and he almost felt that he could dare everything and lose everything for the sake of her. Surely, if she loved him, this fresh love must be more full of life than any love could be that Dorothy had for him now? Could her affection, indeed, be much more than a sentiment or a memory? had not his own for her almost dwindled down to that, even before he had ever seen Cicely Verner?

Still, he finally assured himself that it would be best for him to go. He had passed these last days in more or less of a fever, and a state of fever, he was well aware, is not a condition that helps the mind of man to come to wise conclusions in difficult crises. If, even in the moments when he was most powerfully

drawn to Cicely, he had never entirely trusted her, on the whole did that not give good ground for fearing that she was not completely to be trusted? She charmed him, he knew; but yet he also knew that she was not good; she had told him so with her own lips, and he had heard stories of her from other people's lips as well, which he did not disbelieve. Perhaps she cared for him; but suppose, even, that she accepted his love and married him, should he be satisfied, and feel that he had done the wisest thing that he could do in making her his wife? He remembered how she had told him, not a week ago, that she hardly knew what truth meant; he thought suddenly of that; and then he thought of Dorothy, with her pure eyes and guileless lips.

It had come by this time to be the last week in June.

"I think I will go to Norway," Hugh said to himself. "I will go to Norway for a month or two; I will stay somewhere abroad through the autumn; and then, if I can see my way to it at all, I will go to Dorothy."

So he revolved this plan for a little in his mind, till it began to give some comfort to him. Yes, he would go and see something of the continent, do some mountain climbing in Switzerland perhaps, and get all this fever out of his brain. "As soon as I have got into a fresh atmosphere," he said confidently, "I believe I shall be myself again."

So, on the day following that on which he had last seen Cicely, in the course of the morning, he broke out suddenly before his mother into a tirade against the unwholesomeness of a London life, and prepared her, though perhaps a little vaguely, for his intended flight from it.

"I don't know how you and Phœbe stand this sort of thing year after year," he told her; "but it would never suit me. It is too enervating a life by far. I think I shall go off somewhere soon, mother."

"Shall you, Hugh?" she answered. "Where do you think of going?"

"Oh, I shall go abroad," he said. "And after that I must get to work."

"Well that will be very good," she replied.

"I think I may as well see a little of the continent before I settle down. And then, mother," he said abruptly, "I want to get matters arranged somehow before winter, if I can."

"Very well, my dear," she answered quietly.

And she said nothing more, nor did Hugh.

But the more he thought about his plan

of leaving London the more disposed he felt to carry it out; even if he had had no special reason for leaving London he told himself that it would be best for him to leave it, since this idle, pleasure taking life could bring no profit to him.

"I will get off as soon as I can," he said to himself: and so, with this object in view, on the same afternoon he bent his steps to Bond Street, that at some special shop there he might make certain purchases which he thought necessary for his travelling outfit.

It was the busy time of the day, and the street was very full. As he passed along, suddenly, seated in a carriage that was standing still, he saw Cicely Verner. It was an open carriage, and he was close to her, and, yielding to the impulse of the moment, in his sudden confusion he merely lifted his hat, and would have passed her so, if she had not started

forward. But when she did that, and when their eyes met, he had no longer courage to do what he had tried to do at first.

He went to the carriage door, and held out his hand to her. She had coloured, and he felt that he was colouring too. They each said something quite vapid and commonplace, and then there was an awkward pause.

"Mamma is in there," Cicely explained after this little silence, motioning towards the shop before which the carriage was standing. "She has got to scold the people, but I think she will be back in a minute: will you wait and speak to her?"

"I think not to-day," he answered.

"Will you not?" she exclaimed quickly.

There was a tone of regret in her voice —a pleading look in her eyes, and Hugh

began to feel his resolution giving way.

"I don't care to speak to Mrs. Verner," he said suddenly and hurriedly, "but I did want to say one other word to you. I wanted to ask you not to think me altogether a brute for leaving you as I did yesterday. Will you forgive me for it? I think you would not condemn me if I could tell you everything."

"Oh, I don't condemn you. I was very silly," she said quickly.

"No, you were not silly: you were too good to me—but I dare not accept your goodness. That is all—that is the whole that I dare to say," he exclaimed, and lifted his hand up to his hat again, as if he was about to take his departure; but on this, with a hurried movement, she detained him.

"Oh—wait a moment! We can't talk here, but you are coming again soon to see us, are you not?" she said.

"I am afraid not," he replied gravely. "I am going out of town."

"Oh—not yet? surely?" she ejaculated.

"Yes, almost immediately."

"This week?"

"Well—no, perhaps, not this week."

"Then, will you not come and see us before you go?"

"I don't know. I had better not, I think."

And at that, unwisely, he looked at her, and saw in her face—what he could not bear.

If poor Cicely Verner was an actress she acted sometimes wonderfully to the life; she was able to simulate an emotion at this moment (if she did not feel it) vividly enough to thrill Hugh to the quick.

"I will come, if you wish it. I will come if you care about it and bid you

good-bye," he found himself saying, almost before he knew what words were on his lips.

"You know I care," she replied, half tremulously. "Will you come to-morrow?"

"To-morrow? Well I can hardly say"—

"I would stay at home for you to-morrow."

"You are very good," uneasily; "but you must not do that. Let me take my chance."

But then he saw her face again, and again it was too much for him.

"Very well then—yes, to-morrow," he said hurriedly.

"Thank you!" she whispered. And she gave a quick little comforted smile that moved him almost as much as her starting tears had done.

"You see you always make me break my resolutions," he said to her, with rather dangerous levity as he held out his hand.

"I am very glad," she answered quickly.

He shook his head, but made no other response.

"Good bye," he merely said next moment.

"Till to morrow?" she said.

"Yes—till to-morrow," he replied. And then she let him go.

And, when she had let him go, Hugh walked from the point at which he had parted from her to the end of Bond Street, and never gave one other thought to the purchases which he had meant to make.

He was half annoyed, of course, because he had been driven to promise that he would go again the next day to

see Miss Verner, but mingled with his annoyance came also an irrepressible feeling of elation too. How could it be otherwise? If he was afraid of Cicely, and conscious that it was wisest for him not to see her, had she not also a charm for him at this moment above all other women? He had meant to keep away from her, but circumstances (not his own will) had made his resolution of no avail.

He did go to Chester Square next day, but he did not, as he half feared, half hoped, might be the case, find Cicely alone. She was at home to receive him, but Mrs. Verner was at home too, and, during the half hour of his visit, it was Mrs. Verner and not her daughter who devoted herself mainly to Hugh's entertainment. Cicely was very silent, and seemed depressed; perhaps some little plans that she had made for Hugh's

reception might have been upset before his arrival; it is just possible that she too might not have been calculating on her mother's presence. It was a very chill and showery day, and the elder lady perhaps had a little disconcerted Cicely's arrangements by choosing to remain at home during so comfortless an afternoon.

But, however that may be, Miss Verner was certainly silent, and Hugh made his call and rose to go without having exchanged so much as a word of any special interest with her. She had been so listless that she had not even asked him any further questions about his approaching departure, nor—as she made no inquiries—had he either referred in any way to the matter; when at the end of his visit he bade good bye to Mrs. Verner, nothing was said by anyone to indicate that his adieux were intended to be final.

Perhaps this reticence, as far as Hugh and Cicely were concerned, was not unintentional. He, of course, noticed her silence, and—half voluntarily, half against his will—played into her hands, and remained silent too, thus leaving himself a loophole of retreat from the position he had taken, should he choose to avail himself of it. Since there was no declaration of his intention to depart, this call—unless he pleased—need not be made to bear the character of a farewell visit.

Cicely let her eyes look tired and sad when she held out her hand to bid good bye to him, and their tiredness and their sadness moved him unreasonably. And then she whispered two or three words to him, and that little utterance went to his heart.

"This is not good bye?" was all she said as she looked at him, and almost before he knew what he was about he

found himself answering, "No." Had it been possible to have said anything more he thought when he had left the house that he would have made his answer different; but with only time and power to reply "Yes" or "No," how could he have responded to her pleading look with anything so unkind as "Yes?"

"So I shall still have to see her once more," he reflected, as he went away, and as he said this he knew—he could not help knowing—that the thought of seeing her once more made him glad. He had meant to bid her farewell to-day, and now he felt that he was respited—that, before his renunciation must be made, he had still one last pleasure to look forward to.

"I suppose I had better delay my going for a little while," he said to himself presently, and, in fact, it was easy to delay that matter, seeing that he had

as yet made no preparations for his departure, nor, indeed, even mentioned his intention at home, except in the slight way that I have noticed to Mrs. Ludlow. He thought that if he were to call again upon the Verners it would be almost necessary that he should remain in London for a little longer; so, irresolute and dissatisfied with himself—half impatient to be away, yet half eager to snatch at reasons why he should not go—he lingered day after day till another week had passed. And then at the week's end he called again in Chester Square.

Both Mrs. and Miss Verner were at home, the servant said, but it was Mrs. Verner alone who first received him. She was sitting talking to some other lady, and she greeted him with her usual cordiality. She conversed with him for ten minutes without mentioning her daughter's name; and then suddenly, though

the door had not opened, Hugh became conscious of the approach towards him of some other persons, and, turning his head a little, he saw Miss Verner advancing from the further drawing-room, with Lord Millwood following a step or two behind her. These two had been together in that inner room, talking so quietly that no sound of their voices had reached Hugh's ear.

She came forward quickly, with an easy smile upon her lips, but she did not look at Hugh as she gave her hand to him. She took a seat near him, and began to talk at once in her most lively way. She half turned her back upon Lord Millwood, and for five minutes scarcely addressed a word to him; she made herself very pleasant to Hugh, and courteous and cordial for that little time; but after those minutes had passed she gradually let Lord Millwood absorb her

again. He addressed some question to her, and she turned to him to answer it; he followed his first question by a second and a third; presently he used some transparent device to induce her to withdraw with him a second time, and she perceived his intention and yielded to it. It was some ornament that he asked her to show him—a statuette purchased recently and standing at the other end of the room—which formed the pretext for her withdrawal: without a word to Hugh, she rose from her seat and left him.

After this there was little more for Hugh to do. He sat talking for a few minutes longer to Mrs. Verner, and then he too rose and took his leave.

Cicely came towards him hastily, when she saw him on his feet.

"You are not going, are you?" she said to him quickly, and then for the first

time she looked him in the face. Her own face was a little flushed; she did not look happy; there was a sort of appeal for pity in her eyes. But he was angry, and would not let that poor appeal touch him.

"Yes, I am going now. Good morning," he merely said, and he held her hand only for a moment, and left the room.

Perhaps he had no right to be angry with her as he went away, for what he had seen was no more than what, after her confession to him about Lord Millwood, he should have been prepared to see; but a jealous man is beyond the reach of reason, and the actual vision of a thing tries us more than the report of it; so Hugh went away full of a burning indignation, and with bitter thoughts in his heart, and bitter words upon his lips.

How could he have been so great a fool as to let himself be troubled by such a woman? he passionately asked himself. Once more, for the brief space of a few hours, he fell back on his original judgment of her, and told himself bitterly that she was a woman made for evil—with an illimitable passion in her for admiration, and a heart as hard and cold as stone.

He said this in his wrath for a few hours; and then at the end of that time, to his sudden surprise, and to the overturning of all his afternoon's indignation, he met Cicely again. At a house at which he was engaged to dine he unexpectedly found both Mrs. and Miss Verner amongst the guests, and, by a strange chance, as they were pairing to go into the dining-room, it was to his share that Cicely fell.

"Mr. Ludlow, will you take Miss Ver-

ner?" their hostess said to Hugh, and with a rush of contending emotions he advanced and offered her his arm. He had already bowed to her from a distance; he merely now said a half inaudible word or two, and then they began to make their way in silence from the room.

When they were half way down the stairs she was the first to speak.

"Fate is kind to us sometimes," she said, very quietly. "I had no idea that you would be here; but I did so want to see you."

She paused, but he made no answer, and then she looked up quickly in his face.

"Are you angry with me?" she said timidly, in a whisper.

"What right have I to be angry?" he gravely answered.

"Right has nothing to do with it," she exclaimed, almost impatiently.

But by this time they had reached the dining-room door, and nothing more could be said. They took their seats at table, and then they were both silent for two or three minutes.

"If you want to be angry you *have* the right," she said, beginning in a low voice to speak again after that pause. (The party was a large one, and, with the couple on either side of them busily engaged in talk, it was easy enough for Cicely to say what she pleased unheard.) "If you want to be angry you *have* the right. Have I not given it to you before now?"

"I do not think so," he said.

"You do not think so! Why, have I not asked help from you, and begged you to be my friend? And when I have friends, do you think I do not allow them to find fault with me?"

"You are very good; but I think, as

far as I am concerned—I think, for both our sakes, that *I* had better not find fault with you," he replied, still in the same grave way. "Let us speak of something else."

"But I don't want to speak of anything else. I want to speak of this. Do you think," she said hurriedly, "that I was not grieved to-day when you went away? You believe it was my own fault that I treated you as I did? that is what has made you angry—is it not? Ah, you do not know! You thought I was content to talk to Lord Millwood? When you had gone away I went to my own room and cried. I cried, till I hardly thought I could come here to-night. I believed that you had gone away, and that I should never see you any more. When you came into the room just now—" said the girl, and then suddenly broke off.

Hugh made no reply to her; he could not trust himself to speak.

"Are you not going to forgive me?" she said softly, after a little while. "How could I help what happened to-day? I would have helped it if I could, but mamma was watching me; did not you understand? She watches me when Lord Millwood comes as a cat watches a mouse, and I am a coward; I am afraid of her; I do what she wants. To-day after you went I was so miserable that I could hardly be civil to him, and she was furious with me. She scolded me—she said such cruel things; and I thought that you were gone, and that I should have no one to help me any more, and that—I might as well give it all up," said Cicely, in an almost inaudible voice.

"And are you going to do that?" Hugh asked her, suddenly and harshly.

"Why do you ask me like that? Have

you no pity for me?" she said, wistfully. "When I saw you come into the room just now, do you know my heart leapt to my lips. I was very selfish, I know I am selfish; but my first thought—my only thought—was that you would save me somehow, that you had come back and would make me strong again; but now—now— Is all the little interest you ever had in me gone?" said the girl, almost below her breath. "You used to be kind to me, but now you make me feel as if I were holding out my hands to you, and you were putting *your* hands behind your back."

"How can you say such things?" he exclaimed quickly.

"But it is true. You speak so harshly to me."

"I do not mean to speak harshly to you; but what in the world can I do? You call on me for help, and it is out of my power to help you."

"You did not say that when I appealed to you first. You did me so much good then."

"The good was merely in your own imagination. I did nothing for you really —nothing."

"You gave me sympathy; you were sorry for me. But now you are only hard. You think me so much to blame that you cannot forgive me."

"I may think you to blame," in a hesitating tone; "but I am sorry for you— I am sorry with all my heart. I think you ought to take your place amongst the noblest women, and I see you, instead of that—"

"You see me, instead of that, preparing to degrade myself," she said firmly, after a moment or two, when he did not bring his sentence to an end. "Is not that what you mean? Yes—and it is true —it is quite true. Only I have not done

it yet;" she said, almost piteously. "You ought to remember that. I have not done it yet, and I may be kept from doing it. But, if I am to be kept," she said suddenly, below her breath, "you must not leave me to struggle alone."

And then they were both silent, for wild as her appeal was, it seemed to him at that moment that it would be impossible for him to tell her that he must leave her.

He had tried to harden himself against her, but yet he could not continue to be hard. Her calls on him for help moved him, as he might have been moved by the sight of some drowning woman holding out her arms to him. The aid that he could give her was purely imaginary, he knew, yet if she even thought that he could give it, how could he refuse the request she made?

Miss Verner's neighbour on her right

hand addressed her with some remark, and for a few minutes she spoke no more to Hugh, nor when she turned to him again did she continue the talk that had been broken off. She only said once in a low voice,

"I am afraid that mamma may notice us. Let us talk about other things now. Perhaps I can speak to you again presently, when we go upstairs."

And then, during the rest of the dinner, though she talked very pleasantly, she said nothing to disturb Hugh's equanimity any further, unless indeed her mere companionship proved enough by itself to do that, as I almost fear it did.

Undoubtedly he was ready enough to go back to her side when he joined her again after dinner in the drawing-room, and she was not unready on her part to welcome him. Perhaps, in truth, she was even waiting for him when he came.

She had been talking to some other lady near a door that opened into a conservatory, and when Hugh entered the room she merely paused till she had caught his eye, and given a momentary smile to him, and then, rising from her seat, wandered carelessly away among the flowers, assured enough perhaps that he would follow her, as he did. Before a minute had passed he had reached her side, and she turned to him with a look that it was little wonder brought the blood to his cheek.

"I think I ought not to have said you were not kind to-night. You are kind. You are very good to come again to me," she said, the next moment. "You have come because you feel that I really want you—have you not? and you are sorry for me? and you are not going to be angry any longer?"

"You know I am not angry," he answered, in a low voice.

"I hope you are not, now. But you were a little while ago. Did you not—Mr. Ludlow, tell me the truth—did you not almost hate me when you came here to-night?"

"Why do you ask me?" he said, in a low voice. "You had made me unhappy in the afternoon—you know that. But what is the good of talking in this way?" he exclaimed hurriedly.

"Oh, there is good in it. You must not say that. There is a great deal of good. I am so lonely, and when I talk to you I feel as if I had at least one friend. You must not go away," she continued, suddenly, in an entreating voice; "that is what I wanted to tell you again. If you go, I shall give it all up; I shall have no heart left to fight any more."

"Miss Verner, you must not speak so," he said, in great distress.

"But I *will* speak so; why should I not, when I am only telling you what is true? I am trying so hard to speak the truth to you, and you must not prevent me. Do you think I want anything from you but what I say? Oh, no! indeed I do not. I remember all that you told me—about how you are placed, I mean—and it is all quite right; I would not alter anything; only I want us to be friends still, and people do not leave their friends at their great need. Do you think they do? when they are in need of them between life and death, as I am?"

"But what do you want me to do?" he exclaimed, almost at his wits' end. "What can I possibly do for you?"

"You can help me to be strong," she answered instantly. "Whenever I am with you I feel as if you could make me

better than I am, and when you threaten to go away my heart dies in me. There — that is the truth—the whole truth. I daresay you think I should not say it, but if I don't say it you will go away, and I can't bear you to go. Will you stay now, when I beg you?" she said, and lifted her eyes full to his. "Will you stay, when a woman asks you who has scarcely another friend in the world?"

"And, if I stay, what is to become of *me?*" he asked, in a strange sudden voice. "You are thinking of yourself; do you never think of me as well?"

"What is to become of you? Why should anything become of you?" she answered as if in surprise, but her gaze at him became less steady, and her eyelids quivered a little.

"Do you think that I can go on seeing

you—having meetings like this with you," he exclaimed, "and still remain bound—in anything except name—to another woman? If you can possibly think so, you know no more of a man's nature than if you were a child!"

"But you misunderstand—" she said, hesitating.

"What do I misunderstand?" he interrupted her, almost harshly. "*You*, possibly, but not myself. You ask me to stay near you." For one moment he paused, and then he broke out passionately—"Well, I will stay near you if you like, but understand what my doing that means. It means," he cried suddenly, and almost fiercely, "that if I stay I cease to be Miss Wilmot's lover, and that instead I become yours."

"But—I do not want you to do that," she exclaimed, with a frightened look. She turned round; she half looked as

if she would escape, but he stood between her and the only door, and she could not.

"No, I do not suppose you want me to do it," he said, bitterly. "Do you suppose I think you are prepared to marry me? But, if I stay near you, you will have to take the possibility of that into account. Understand—it is still all in your own hands to decide. Bid me go if you will. If you do that, you will do —what is best for us both, I think, and we will shake hands to-night and part. But if you still bid me stay, then let there be no misunderstanding on either side. If I remain, I do it in the hope that you will in the end become my wife; and, if you tell me to remain, comprehend clearly that you give me the right to hope that. Now make up your mind. All this talk about friendship is utter nonsense. From this moment I am your

lover, or I cease to be anything to you at all."

And then, having made this speech in a white heat of passion, Hugh stood still and faced her, knowing bitterly in his heart, through all his passion, that he was a scoundrel—mourning even already over the grave of his lost love with an agonized, remorseful mourning—and yet, as he stood before this other woman, feeling that she had become for him —for the moment—the one prize for which he was willing to lose the world.

She tried to turn away from him; for a few moments she would not look him in the face. If Cicely Verner had ever been agitated in her life she was agitated when Hugh had spoken his passionate words.

"What am I to say to you? What can I do?" she only began to whisper pre-

sently, in an entreating voice. "I did not mean you to say this. Oh, I wish you had not said it, for how can I answer you? how can I ask you to do anything for me now?"

"Why should you not?" he answered quickly. It was a strange and dreadful thing to him to feel that, even at this moment, he had a kind of scorn for her, a curious instinctive conviction that she would make use of him if she could for her own ends, and then at the last be ready to fling him off. "Why should you not?" he said. "You have entreated me for help when I have neither offered it nor been willing to give it; now, when I tell you I am ready to give you everything, why should you suddenly become scrupulous and hesitate?"

"Because—" she began quickly, and then faltered: "because now," she began again, in a low voice, "you say

that you want something in return from me."

"But I do not require you to bind yourself to give me what I want."

She looked at him with a sudden eager hope.

"You will leave me free?" she said.

"What can I do but leave you free?"

"Oh, then—stay!" she said, quickly. The blood flushed all over her face; for one moment she touched his arm with her hand; for almost less than a moment she looked at him. It was a glance so quick that it was like a flash of light, but, rapid as it was, it told Hugh something —or he thought it told him something— that almost made him reel, and in another second some wild words would have burst from his lips, if suddenly a

step had not broken on their solitude, and made her draw quickly back from him.

The new comer was a man, who, having seen a pair of figures at the farther end of the conservatory, had advanced to meet them—a pair of figures engaged apparently in examining the flowers, for Miss Verner, as he approached, was bending over some rare plant, making inquiries of Hugh about its blossoms in the most naturally interested voice in the world.

"Mr. Hollis, can *you* tell me this? Are these flowers always the same colour? or are they not sometimes crimson and sometimes white?" she turned round and asked the intruder, with a look of as innocent and unconfused inquiry in her eyes as if for the last quarter of an hour she and Hugh had been talking about nothing else than botany.

Mr. Hollis could not give her the information for which she was so desirous, but, if incapable of enlightening her on this special point, he could yet discourse on other matters, and in another minute Cicely was in a full flow of conversation with him, and Hugh, fuming at the interruption, and distracted with many emotions and many thoughts, was left to amuse himself in silence, as he best could. It is true that Cicely addressed one or two other indifferent remarks to him, but, in whatever mood *she* might be, *he* was in none to be lightly bandying gay talk with her: a man who has done what Hugh had just done is scarcely in the humour that makes laughter and light words sweet.

Hugh was at war with himself; he abhorred himself for this hour's work, and yet he knew, even while he was almost stunned at the thought of his

perfidy, and of the position in which he had placed himself, that the one thing in the world he wanted was to bind this woman to himself, to have the right to take her, with all her faults and all her beauties, and to warm and enrich his own life with her. Reason could no longer help him; argument could not touch him; he had sacrificed everything for her now—honour, and truth, and Dorothy's happiness; but still, though he knew all this with a terrible clearness, he felt—at this moment, at any rate—that he was ready to dare any consequences, to pay any price, to submit even to any self-contempt for the sake of this prize that he wanted to win. He had parted company in this last hour alike with wisdom, prudence, duty, and honour, and he was mad enough to know that, and yet to tell himself that he could not draw back now.

But Miss Verner had given him all she meant to give him to-night. He gained nothing more from her; or, at least, he gained nothing more till the moment came in which he bade her good-night. For an hour she had been talking to other people, and addressing to him, when she addressed him at all, only the most common-place and indifferent words; but when she was going away, at the door, while Mrs. Verner was stepping into her carriage, he managed to reach her side, and speak a sentence to her that she was forced to answer.

"When can I see you again?" he asked her. "Shall you be at home if I come early to-morrow?"

Perhaps she had been prepared for the inquiry, or, if she was not prepared, she was ready at any rate, for she replied to it at once.

"I would stay at home," she said.

And then she gave a quick glance at him, and all at once the colour, which, cool as she was with most people, rose so often with apparent involuntariness when she spoke to Hugh, came to her face, and—"Do you want to come?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said.

"Then come as you did before—about twelve."

She spoke almost below her breath, and passed on instantly. Her host was waiting at the carriage door to hand her to her seat, so Hugh stood back; but he had seen that eloquent blood rise to her cheek again—he had felt her hand linger a moment in his—and it was no wonder after that if he went away believing that she cared for him, and too dizzy from the mad leap that he had made into sudden rapture to be able either to think, or to repent.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Hugh went home that night he was uncertain about everything save the one fact that he had placed himself in a position from which it was not possible for him to retreat. He had been hurried, without any previous intention, into telling Cicely that he loved her, but even as he made the confession his love had sprung to passion; and it seemed to him that he could neither quench nor smother it now. He had declared himself her lover, and the words in which he had made this

declaration it was impossible, he said to himself, to recall. So, after a night of fever, during which he neither could think, nor dared to think, he went back to her.

She received him with something that was—less than agitation, perhaps, yet less than composure too. She did not look at him when she met him; she took her hand away from him rather hastily; she began when they sat down to try to talk to him as if nothing special had taken place between them, and they stood still in the same relation to one another in which they had stood on previous days. But he, on his part, was too conscious that they stood in a new relation to submit to this pretence.

"Why do you talk to me in this way? What do I care about those people we met last night?" he said to her impatiently, when, for a minute or two, she

had been endeavouring to turn the conversation to the dinner party of the previous evening. "I care to recollect that I met you yesterday; but do you think that I can recollect or dwell on anything else?"

"But you ought to recollect something else; you ought not only to think of that," she replied with an attempt at jesting. "Or, rather, you ought to think only of other things, and not of that at all. Do you know," said the girl suddenly, and a little nervously, "I am afraid I am wrong to have let you come this morning; only there was no time to hesitate when you asked me last night. You took me aback; and so I said 'Yes,' when I had better have said, 'No.'"

"Then do you not want me to be here?" Hugh asked quickly.

"It is not a question of whether I

want you or not. I am not thinking of that. We may want many things, and yet—refuse them," said Cicely softly.

"Is there any reason why I should not come?

"I think there is. I think—you know there is," half hesitating.

"After what I said to you last night, do you mean?"

"Y—es, I was thinking of that."

"Because I put into words—what you knew already?"

"I did not know it. You must not say that. I did not know it, indeed!" in a tone of distress.

"You must have understood before last night what you were becoming to me. You could not have been ignorant of it." His tone was becoming hot.

"But, indeed, I was!"

"You did not understand that it was because of you that I was going away?"

"I did not!" in the most earnest voice.

"Miss Verner, how much am I to believe of what you are saying? Can you not speak the truth to me?" said poor Hugh passionately. "I know that you do not speak it often, for you have told me so; but I know too that you can speak it sometimes. I have come to you now, as you know, with my heart in my hand; do not meet me with a lie."

"But I don't know what you mean," she said in a half-frightened voice.

"I want us to talk over this together. I want to know how I stand with you. I cannot have you prevaricate with me. I want to understand why, each time that you have met me of late, you have so persistently asked me to remain within your reach."

"You know why," she said in a low voice. "I have told you again and again."

"You have never told me in any intelligible way. You have only spoken vaguely about my helping you. How do you mean me to help you? There is one way of doing it. I know of that one, but I know of no other. Have you had that one in your mind when you have made these appeals to me?"

"Oh, no!" she cried. The blood flushed over her whole face: she clasped her hands with an earnest movement on her knees, but—she kept her eyes turned from him.

"If you have not meant that, what else have you meant?"

And then she made no answer, but after a few moments she began to cry.

He had been harsh to her, but when he saw her crying his heart smote him for his harshness.

"I think I am a brute to you," he

exclaimed remorsefully; "but, if I loved you less, do you suppose I should hurt you like this? I seem to be cruel because I am trying to get the truth from you. Why cannot you be true?" he sorrowfully asked. "Do you know what you are like to me? You are like some precious jewel with a deadly flaw in it. I love you, and yet I do not believe in you. Can you not trust me and treat me honestly?" he said pleadingly after a little silence. "I believe that from the first day on which you called to me for help you have known where you have been leading me. How could you fail to know it? Women like you do not make such appeals in ignorance of what will result from them. Can you look at me, and tell me that during these weeks you have not deliberately meant that I should love you?"

But she did not look at him. Instead

of that she hid her face, and he heard her sobbing.

After a little while she said in a broken voice—

"*You* are very hard to me." She dropped her hands down as she spoke, and then for a moment she lifted her eyes to him, all swimming in tears. "I have told you already that I am a selfish woman," she broke out all at once, quickly and almost passionately. "I thought if I saw you sometimes it would make things easier to bear. I tried to get what I wanted. I ought to have thought of you perhaps—but men can take care of themselves," she said suddenly and bitterly.

"Have you found that hitherto?" he asked. And, when she did not answer, "Have you lived till now," he went on quickly and almost roughly, "doing all the harm you have, without ever knowing

what it is to make a man curse the day he first saw you?"

She lifted her face up suddenly to him with a startled look in her wide opened eyes.

"You are not going to do that?" she said hurriedly.

He gave a sad half-laugh.

"No, I have not come to that yet," he said. "I am one of the fools who have only flung away their honour for you, and to whom it seems yet as if to win you would be to win the sweetest thing on earth. How can you fascinate men so when they know how false you are?" he went on passionately after a moment's silence. "You are no angel, though you have the face of one. You are no angel, as I know well, but a most faulty woman, selfish, as you say, and reckless and cruel and untrue. You are all that, and sometimes I think you are worse than all that;

sometimes I think you are utterly heartless too. God knows whether I am right or wrong."

"If you think you are right, why do you come near me?" she said in a low voice.

"Because I must be sure of what you are now before I have strength to leave you," he answered instantly. "Of a good deal I am sure, but not of your heartlessness. If I could make you love me—" the young man paused, his voice almost broke: he looked at her with a passion of yearning in his face—"If I could make you love me—if you had it in you to do that," he repeated, "I would take you fearlessly, with all your other faults, for your love would save you."

"Would it, do you think?" she said in a strange voice.

She slowly lifted up her head, and looked at him, almost as if she were afraid to look.

"You believe a great deal in love: more than I do," she said sadly.

"You do not believe in it because you have never known it."

"No, I suppose I have never known it—never in the way you mean," she answered very softly. "Or at least, it is best to think so," she added after a moment, half aloud.

And then there was a pause, that lasted for a good while.

As he sat looking at her while it lasted he half believed—perhaps he almost quite believed—that she loved him. He might have to fight for her; she would have to conquer herself before she would give herself to him, but at the end would there not come victory, and the reward that he desired? He was not thinking much of Dorothy now: he had put the thought of Dorothy for the time behind him: he was only thinking of this woman by his

side, with her fair face, and the soiled nature that love for him was to ennoble and make pure.

"Oh, you do not know how hard things are always made for me," she began to say bitterly, after the silence had lasted for a little while. "If I were left alone, if I were left to good influences, I might be good perhaps. *You* could make me good, I almost think—at least, you might have done it once: but not now," she suddenly said, with a drop in her voice. "I don't think even you could do anything now."

"Will you let me try?" he instantly asked. "Will you give me the right to try?"

"Oh no!" she said hurriedly.

"What does that answer mean? Does it mean that you reject me? that I am not to come to you again?"

"No, not that." She looked at him

with the blood flooding her face. "I was not thinking of that."

"Then, in heaven's name, what *are* you thinking of? In what relation are we to stand to one another? You must come to some decision. Remember what I have given up to call myself your lover. A man who has done what I have done for your sake asks something more than to be allowed to be an idle hanger on in your drawing-room. You may dismiss me altogether if you like, that is still in your power to do; but if you wish me to remain near you, understand that I must remain in some different position from that."

"When have I ever wished you to be a hanger on of mine?" she said quickly, in rather an unsteady voice. "I never did. I have had too much respect for you. You know," she said softly, turning away her face, "you know what you have been

to me has been something very unlike that."

"What have I been?" he said.

"You do not need to ask me. You know how I have regarded you always."

"I know how you have professed to regard me. But are your professions, do you think, to be always trusted?" he said scornfully.

"Oh, do not be so hard to me!" she cried, as if he hurt her.

"You have entreated me to be a friend to you: you have made appeals to my friendship again and again: it was always as a friend that you said you looked on me; but you have looked on me as more than a friend for weeks past. You have known for weeks that you have had the power of moving me as no mere friend could: you have known that I have avoided you, that I had meant to leave England, because I was afraid to

trust myself with you. You knew this, and you also knew the strong reason I had for ceasing to see you. And yet, in spite of this knowledge, there is no occasion on which we have met during these weeks on which you have not done your utmost to tempt me to remain within your reach. Miss Verner, you must tell me now why you have done this thing? You must tell me once for all in plain words. Have you only asked me to stay because, in your insatiable vanity, you have wanted to add another name to the list of men who have become fools for you? or have you done it because you have thought it possible that you could return my love?"

He was bending near her; he had spoken without vehemence, in a sternly controlled voice, but in a bitter voice too, until he came to the last words. His tone softened then, and with a little

sudden sob, as if its softness moved her, she covered her face with her hands. She only said, half inaudibly, after a little silence—

"I have told you already—how you always seemed to do me good."

"Yes—you have told me that already, but now I want a fuller answer from you. I want you to tell me what you knew about me; I want you to tell me whether you knew I loved you?"

But she made no answer, though, as she still hid her face, he could see the colour dyeing her throat.

"Miss Verner, you must reply to my question—you must say, 'Yes,' or, 'No,' to me—and I ask you to speak the truth. I think you owe it to me to speak it. Did you know I loved you?"

And then at last she said—"Yes."

She said it with an almost hysteric

burst of crying. He was pressing her very hard, and as he made her own the lie she had told him, her humiliation pierced her to the quick.

"That is the truth at last," he said. "And now, answer me one other question, and I will ask you nothing more. What was your object in tempting me on? Have you done nothing but play with me all along? or, has it been true, as I have sometimes dread to think——" And then he stopped, for his voice had become choked.

"I have not played with you," she said. She let her hands fall suddenly from her face, and with a strange kind of piteous look she turned it to him. "I have not played with you. If I were free—if I could dare—Oh, but I can dare nothing, and I am not free!" she all at once cried. "Do you care for me enough to wait?—just to wait and

see? I cannot tell—I cannot tell yet what I shall have strength to do—but you can help me—you can be more than anyone to me—if you will stay!"

"I will stay if you give me a hope of winning you. Without that hope I cannot stay," he said.

"Then I do give it to you," she said hurriedly. "I give it to you—I would give you more if I dared. Only be good to me, and ask nothing else for a little while."

He took her hand in his in silence, and she let him hold it; after a minute he put it to his lips.

"Only be true; do not deceive me, and you shall ask nothing from me in vain," he began presently to say in a voice of strong emotion. "I will be patient; I will give you every aid that is in my power. Ask what you like from me—come to me for whatever help you need.

Only do not deceive me. Promise me this one thing."

"Yes, I promise," she said.

"I do not know upon what my hope of winning you rests," he said after another silence. "Does it depend upon myself—upon anything that I can do? Does it depend upon something, or someone, else? Do you need to know me better before you can give an answer to me?"

"It is not that," she said softly.

"Will you answer me one more question if I put it to you? I have no right to put it; I can only ask you to answer it from kindness to me; yet—answer it if you can. Would you come to me now if you were free to come?"

She made no reply for a few moments, but as he looked in her face which she tried to turn away he saw her colour go and come; her whole look indicated agitation, indecision, distress.

"I cannot tell," she said at last.

She looked suddenly up at him, and then with a great rush the blood all at once came and stayed.

"How can I tell? You know already —more than you ought. If I tell you not to go," she said half inaudibly, "is not that enough?"

"It would be enough from another woman," he replied almost bitterly. "I do not know if it is enough from you."

"It is all I can do," she said.

"Then I must be satisfied, I suppose," he answered.

But he sat silent after that, and it was she presently who was the first to speak again.

"You distrust me now because I have not answered your question," she began to say to him in a sad, injured tone. "How can I answer it? If I loved you

as you want me to love you, I suppose I should dare everything for your sake —and you see I cannot do that— so what I feel for you perhaps is not worth much. If you think it is worth nothing you had better leave me."

"How can I leave you?" he answered gloomily.

"You tell me to be true, and you see when I am true you are angry with me. If I had answered your question as you wished just now you would have been glad for the moment—but how long would it have been before you had begun to reproach me, and to accuse me of having deceived you with saying to you more than the truth? Is it not better to err the other way, and to tell you," said the girl, suddenly dropping her eyes, and letting her voice falter—"to tell you less than I mean rather than too much?"

"Is that what you have done?" he said.

The colour flushed up richly and warmly into his face. "If I have been unjust to you, pardon me; for whatever you give me—God bless you!" he said.

"And will you bear with me now?" she asked him softly after a little silence. "Sometimes perhaps I shall seem a coward to you—sometimes you will not understand, and will think that I have forgotten—this; but will you be patient with me? will you try to trust me? I shall *not* forget."

"I will trust you," he said.

"And you will not talk now about going away? I am selfish, I know; I ask you to stay when I cannot tell what the end will be—but if the end is to be—what you wish—you must stay to make it so. You cannot go on actually holding

my hand," she said with a sudden little laugh, "but you must help me to be strong, by making me feel as if you held it. Will you? Will you be near me when you can?"

"You do not need to ask me that," he said. "I wish to heaven that you could be strong enough now at once to say boldly that you will come to me."

"Ah, but I cannot!" she exclaimed quickly. "I must care for you more before I can do that. If you want to win me," she said, with another curious half laugh, "you must be content to wait for me a little first."

"Well—I am content to wait," he answered. "You know well enough that I will do that. I am ready to wait—and to serve too."

"Then I can only thank you. And I do thank you. I thank you with all my

heart," she said suddenly and earnestly. "And you have made me happy to-day. Do you know that you have done that?" she exclaimed all at once, looking up with a kind of beautiful boldness in his face. "You humbled me a little while ago, by making me tell the truth to you, but now I do not feel as if I were humbled by it any more. I am glad that you care for me. I was glad when you told me that you did last night. If I ever become a better woman it. will be because you have loved me."

She had risen up, with the tears suddenly overflowing her eyes.

"I am going to send you away now," she said next moment. "But come back again soon. Come back again when you like."

"May I come to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes—only—not at this hour," she answered, with a momentary scarcely per-

ceptible hesitation. "I shall be at home in the afternoon; come then. Make any excuse you like for coming; it does not matter what. There were those photographs that you were speaking of last night. Bring some of them for me to look at. Perhaps we may be able to be a little alone together; but I cannot tell. I must not arouse mamma's suspicions, you know."

"Then you will not tell Mrs. Verner what I have said to you to-day?" he asked abruptly.

"Tell mamma!" she exclaimed, in a tone of unrestrained amazement. "No! how could I?"

"Because if she knew she would become my enemy, do you mean?"

"Yes, of course she would be your enemy. She would want me to promise not to see you any more."

"So I must continue to come here,"

Hugh said, flushing, "deceiving her as to the motive for which I come?"

"Ah, no, that is not necessary;" Cicely answered simply. "She will not care at all, though she thinks you like me. It is *my* feeling only that she would mind."

"Then *you* must deceive her?" he said.

She looked at him as if his scruples almost puzzled her, and hesitated a little before she spoke.

"Yes, I suppose you may call it deceiving her," she said at last; "it is keeping some things concealed from her at least; but then, you see, we are obliged to keep them concealed. What else can we do, when, if she knew—if she knew even half that I have said to you to-day, she would make me so miserable?" The girl's voice began to tremble again. "I know it is bad to have to speak of one's

mother in this way; I know I shock you," she said hastily, and deprecatingly, "but if I deceive her she forces me to do it. I have had to do it for so many years that I had almost forgotten—long ago—that any one would think it wrong."

Was it for such a woman as this—a woman brought up not to know the difference between truth and falsehood—that Hugh had broken his pledge to Dorothy? "I don't think the fault is yours," he only said, in answer to her; but after all the passion of the morning he was unhappy enough, and ill enough at ease, as he presently left the house, and went his way home.

And yet still, in spite of his self-dissatisfaction, he loved Cicely now with a love that silenced reason. What she was at this moment grieved him, but what he believed she had the power of becoming made his heart throb and burn. If he

could but win her, he told himself, he would remove her from every influence that hurt and degraded her now; as his wife she should begin a new and nobler life. By marrying her he would save her, and, if through his love for her he did this, would not the act almost atone for the cruelty of his sin against that other girl, of whose sweet face and pure true eyes he thought even in the midst of all his fever with a wild pang of remorse?

CHAPTER VIII.

IT was a hot summer, and through the sultry weeks Hugh, in no happy or placid mood, went on with his wooing. The die had been cast; he had forsaken Dorothy, and had become the slave of Cicely Verner; but the hours of bliss that he enjoyed over this transition were few—the hours given to doubt, to jealousy, to suspense, were many, and he found them hard to bear. He proved himself by no means a sweet-tempered lover; as the days went on he was torn by emotions too violent and too contend-

ing for him to be able always, or even often, to dress his face in smiles.

He contrived to see a great deal of Miss Verner during these weeks, and sometimes they met alone; but on most occasions they only met in the company of other people, when no special talk between them was possible, and at these different times she appeared before him in moods that varied like the wind—that varied indeed with a persistency of variation that drove him wild; for he would find her kind to-day, and cold as ice to-morrow; or full of jest to-day, and full of sadness when he saw her next; or she would treat him one day almost as she might treat a stranger, and turn to him on another as a woman would only turn to the man she loved.

"I am changeable—do you tell me?" she said to him once. "Well, when did you ever know a woman who was not

changeable? Would you like me only to have one phase? and, if it were so, what would your highness choose that that special phase should be? I think I can guess," and she began to laugh mockingly. "You would like to fix me in an attitude of humility and devotion to yourself, my eyes half lifted up to you, half depressed by the thought of my own unworthiness."

He turned away without answering her when she made this speech—too angry to reply to it. She often made him angry in these days with at times almost a savage anger, and yet he could not leave her, nor disenchant himself with her.

Nor would she have let him leave her. If ever for a moment he tried to free himself she was quick to see the effort, and with some sudden word or look to rivet his fetters on him again. She would give

these looks or say these words with a wonderful sureness of effect—with a certainty that often made her reckless of provoking him, because she knew that, provoke him as she might, she had but to speak one sentence to him, to lift up to his for one moment those eyes of hers which, when she chose, could look so wonderfully true and sweet, and the offence that she had given would be forgotten—the evil impression she had made would be effaced.

"If I did not believe that you were true in the bottom of your soul, do you think I could love you as I do?" he asked her sadly enough, one day. "Do you know that there are moments when, if I did not believe as I do, I would break away from you, and pray God that I might never see your face again."

"Do you think you could break away from me and not come back?" she an-

swered daringly, when he said that. She looked into his face, and her own face flushed a little. "You would come back if I called you," she said. "If I wanted you —wherever you were—I think you would come."

Her lips trembled as she spoke; the tears came to her eyes; these were the kind of speeches she could make to him when she saw that he was getting restive under the treatment he received.

He saw her often, for he went to the house a great deal, and at all his visits Mrs. Verner received him graciously, with the same unvarying smile, and appearance of cordiality, seeming to take no exception whatever to his manifest admiration for her daughter. In fact, as Cicely had frankly told him, his feelings were matters of no moment in her mother's sight; the men who hovered about her daughter Mrs. Verner made welcome enough to sun

themselves in the light of her presence; there were more of them than only Hugh and Lord Millwood, and to them all (except Lord Millwood) Mrs. Verner awarded much the same pleasant smiles and courteous welcomes.

"Mamma leaves me to myself as long as she is not afraid," Cicely said with a curious laugh to Hugh one day. "You see," and she began to speak very bitterly, "she has trained me so well that she knows she can trust me pretty far. She thinks at present that she can trust me safely enough with you."

"Does she think that because you have told her that she can?" Hugh asked when she said this, not without a tone of scorn in his voice, and the tone and the words made the colour come to the girl's face.

But though she coloured, she was angry because he had made her do it, and—

"What do you want? Shall I go and tell her all that has passed between us?" she asked him quickly. "You are always harping about the truth; well, let her know the truth, if you like—let her know that you have asked me to marry you, and that I have not said No to you, and then—I wish you joy! You will be likely to come here often again—will you not? And you will be very happy when you feel that you have closed the door against yourself, and—left me to my mother's mercy!"

And then, when she spoke like this, how could he answer her? In his heart he had little doubt that she had spoken falsely about him to Mrs. Verner, and denied that she had any feeling for him, in order that she might turn away her mother's suspicions. As he stood by her side he felt of a certainty that she had done this, and yet, could he charge her

with having done it, or tell her still that she should speak the truth? Could he bear to be separated from her? Could he bear to leave her, as she had said, to her mother's mercy, or even for one hard moment to dream of leaving her? She had roused his scorn for a minute, but now she only moved him to a passionate sorrowful tenderness.

"I think I am sometimes very cruel to you," he said suddenly, "and yet, God knows, I would save you from every trouble, great or small, if I could, with my life's blood."

"Then you must save me from mamma," she said quickly, with a momentary attempt at laughter, that sounded sad enough. "Do you think it can never be right to do evil that good may come?" she suddenly asked after another moment. "I think it must be—sometimes. I don't know how to believe differently. I think there are

times," she said, with the kind of recklessness that came over her at moments, and made her dare to say to Hugh what would shock him most, "I think there are times when we can only be saved by lies."

"Do you indeed believe that?" he only answered gravely. And then they were both silent. What right had he to rebuke her? If her moral vision were dim, had he proved his own to be so clear? He felt—and for a good while past had been feeling—like a man who had forsaken the straight road of life, and had turned aside to grope in pathless ways, where heaven's light had failed him, and wrong had grown confused with right.

Not seldom, when Hugh called in Chester Square, he found Lord Millwood and Cicely together, and on these occasions he had to endure not only

the pains of jealousy, but a bitter sense of humiliation, for in Lord Millwood's presence Cicely treated him with a careless indifference the meaning of which he could be at no loss to understand.

"And it must be so—I cannot help it," she always told him. "Mamma would make me suffer if I did not do what you scold me for. I am her slave—as yet, you know, and what can slaves do but submit to their bondage?"

"And how long are you going to remain her slave?" he asked her vehemently once when she said this. "You might free yourself at any moment—but you will not. Can you not care for me enough yet to come to me? You are no coward, I think, and yet you act as if you were one. Will you not take me now, and let all this end?"

But she would not.

"I cannot do it—yet. Did you not

tell me that you would be patient, and give me time?" she only said entreatingly. "I am a coward, though you think I am only pretending to be one. I am a coward in some ways to the very core of my heart. And I am selfish too." And then she stopped. She looked at him, and, with those last words hardly spoken, suddenly a great softness and sweetness came into her eyes. "I am a selfish woman, and so—ought I to marry you?" she said. "There may be moments when I think I could be glad to do it; but if I were your wife I should not make you happier—I should not make you richer—I should not bring one good thing into your life."

"You would bring yourself—the best thing on the whole earth," he said.

But she only shook her head.

"You can tell me this now—but do you

think you would say the same ten years after this?" she answered, almost bitterly. "Love may be very sweet—but how long does love last? How long, if I were your wife, would you look into my eyes, do you think, as you are looking into them now?"

She broke into a sudden laugh, and turned away from him. She was not in a mood at that moment to be much tempted by the thought of marrying him, and Hugh, with a heart that was hot and sore enough, saw that, and left her to herself.

She made him suffer not a little during these weeks, but yet if she gave him scanty food she never starved him altogether, and sometimes she spread a banquet for him, and let him feed on it for a golden hour.

One day he happened to speak to her about some picture which was being ex-

hibited, and which she had not seen, and on the impulse of the moment she asked him suddenly to take her to it, and, accordingly, on the following day they went together.

"Let us go early," he asked her, "before other people come." So they went early, and had the room to themselves for a long time.

It was one of those exhibitions where a single picture is shown by gaslight in a darkened room. Hugh and Cicely looked at it for a little while, and then sat down. The place was so still that they began to talk half in whispers; they had taken their places on a bench not far from the door, where—even when presently a few other visitors dropped in—no one seemed to notice them.

"Do you think it is not something to me to be here—with you?" Hugh said, after a few minutes had passed. "How

little we have ever done together! and I should like us to do everything together, and to see everything with the same eyes."

"Should you?" she answered softly, and gave a little laugh. "That is one of the dreams, I am afraid, that it does not do to think of."

"It is no temptation to *you* to think of it—is it?" he asked. And then—when she did not answer this at once— "Do you ever try for a moment to imagine what it would be if we were together always?" he said, in a low voice. "Can you picture me always by your side, and think if you could bear it?"

"I picture many things," she said.

"And that amongst them?"

"Yes—I suppose I sometimes think of that. But I don't know that I ought to think of it. It seems to me," said the

girl, with a tone of sudden weariness, "that nobody ever does the things they want. We seem to be free agents, and yet we are bound hand and foot all the time; and we do the things that other people tell us to do; even though we resist and cry out we do them all the same."

"That is only a half truth," he said.

"It is more than a half truth to me," she answered. "People call me wilful, and so I may be, in small things; but it is other people's wills that force me in great ones, and not my own. It has been so all my life. Do you think your will is not influencing me now?" she suddenly said. "You have been influencing me for weeks —holding me back from doing what, if it had not been for you, I should have done long ago; and the others are driving me on; and I think between you I am all bruised and torn."

"Then let the struggle cease," he said eagerly. "You can make it cease in a moment, if you will. Resolve to come to me, and do you think I shall not be strong enough to hold you?"

"You could not hold me unless I wanted to be held," she said; "and how can I tell if I should want it? I might give you my promise now, and repent in an hour that I had given it. There have been moments when I have been almost ready to give it. I think of living without you sometimes till I shrink from the prospect of it, and then I wish that I was with you—belonging to you—so that you could not leave me; but for one moment when I think like this there are hours when I think another way. And if I were married to you," she added almost coldly, after a moment's silence, "it would still be so. I should think of what I had lost—I should think of what you

could not give me—and I should repent."

"You would not repent if you loved me," he said. "You only care for me a very little now, if you even care for me at all; but can you not believe that, if you married me, I should be more to you than I am now?"

"You might be more. But suppose it went the other way? Suppose you became less?"

"Would it be reasonable to think that I should become less? Surely if you are drawn to me in any degree already, I might dare to hope that when you belonged to me your heart would be more mine than it is now?"

She gave no answer to that question; she only sat for a little while with her eyes looking down, and then presently she said in a low voice—

"It is not worth your while to trouble

yourself about me at all, I think; that is what it often seems to me. We are happy together sometimes now. I have wanted you, and you have come to me. Now, as we sit here, I don't seem to care much for anything else. I should like to forget that there is anything to be thought of or struggled over. One gets so tired of everything sometimes, and longs so to be still; and it is so quiet here; and—you do love me—don't you?" she said suddenly, and looked up to him with something that was almost like yearning in her eyes.

She went on for a little longer talking to him at intervals in a half-tired way.

"Would you be good to me, I wonder," she said, "if I were married to you? Would you be as good to me as you are now? and as patient with me? and would you care as much to make me happy?

Perhaps for a little while you would care; but after that you might get tired of me, and I should not like you to get tired."

"Have you ever known anyone who tired of you?" he said passionately. "A man may tire of many women, but not of you, I think."

And then she smiled a little, as if this pleased her.

"If we were married, do you believe that you would make me good?" she asked again, in a little while. "I think you could, you know, if any one could, but would you not be afraid to try? And if you tried and failed—what then? Would you give me up, and leave me to myself, and not help me any more, and wish that you had not married me?"

"Never!" he said.

She looked at him when he said "Never!" with something like love for him in her eyes.

"I should not like you to change to me," she said abruptly. "If I refuse to marry you, you will be obliged to change, I know; but I shall not like that time to come. You seem to be mine now, and I have but to speak, and you will do what I ask you for—I have but to look at you and you will leave everyone else and come to me."

"And do you like to have it so?" he asked, in a tone that was half sad, half bitter.

"Yes—I like it," she answered. "Do you want me to be good, and assure you that I do not care for power? I could say that easily, but it would not be true, you know, and you are always telling me how I ought to say nothing but the truth. So I tell you that I should not want to live if I could not make people care for me; and I will tell you something else too, if you like," she added, suddenly.

"I will tell you that it has made me gladder to be loved by you than by anybody else I ever knew."

"And yet you will not come to me!" he cried, with the colour in his face.

But at that she only shook her head.

"How can I tell you what I will do in the end?" she said. "The end is not here yet, and you told me you would be content to wait and serve. Why will you not serve, then, and wait—till the end comes?"

"When will it come? You put me off from day to day," he said. "You have to choose between that other man and me, and you will not make your choice. If it were not for him, do you think I would not wait patiently? But when I see him so constantly at your side, can I be patient, do you think?"

And then she made no answer, but after a little while she said—

"Do not let us talk so. Let us be happy to-day; do not let us speak about the future. I am so content to be with you. Why do you try to take my pleasure away?"

But Hugh's pulses were throbbing, and her sweet words only roused them to a stronger beating.

"How can I believe that you are content to be with me?" he broke out, bitterly. "You say to me what—for anything I know—you would say to twenty other men."

"You do not believe that," she interrupted, quickly.

"How can you know that I do not believe it? There are times when I can believe anything of you. There are times——" he said, and then he stopped; he looked in her face, and the colour

came hotly into his own. "I am mad when I speak like this to you," he suddenly and passionately exclaimed. "I am mad, I know—but it is you who make me so."

"But I do not mean to do it," she said, gently, "and you are very wild and unreasonable. Are you not going to stop quarrelling with me now? In a little while, you know, we must be going away; we have stopped too long, I daresay, even already. Shall we stay just for ten minutes more? and will you say nothing hard to me in these ten minutes? Talk about what you like—anything you like—only not about my faults any more."

She was still looking at him; her lips broke into a smile at the last words.

"Is it always *my* faults that are to be harped upon, and never your own?" she said.

"Do you think I am so ungracious that I only dwell upon your faults?" he asked her, sadly. "Should I be here with you now—should I go everywhere, following you like your shadow—if the truth were not something very different from that?"

"But you follow me against your will," she answered. "That is the truth—is it not? It seems strange to me, you know. I mean, it seems strange that, if you wished to do it, you could not leave me. Why do you like me? You cannot tell. No one can tell. It is all a mystery to both of us."

There were moments, sometimes, when a sense of all the mad unreasonableness of his love for her rushed tumultuously over Hugh—when he saw clearly all the folly of it, all the frantic feverishness of it, and, even with his protestations of fidelity on his lips, felt that his worship

of this woman was only an ephemeral passion that would burn like a fierce fire and then expire. Could he, indeed, tell why he cared for her? could he tell why she should hold him in such thrall that he could not leave her?

"Yes—there are hours when I would go from you if I could," he said, all at once, with a sudden bitter force. "There are times when I know that all this is insanity—when I could wish that I had never seen you. And yet I must go on following you. I cannot tear myself away till you send me from you."

"And do you want me to send you from me, then?" she said. "I will do it, if you like. I will give you your *congé* now—if that is what you want—" and she turned to him, and broke into a light laugh.

"Do you think a careless word would

send me away?" he answered. "I suppose, if that would do it, I should have left you before now. You can only send me from you by doing one thing—and that thing," he cried, "I pray to God you will never do!"

And then to this speech she made no answer; only, after a few moments' silence—

"I think we ought to go," she suddenly said. "You are getting angry with me, and when you get angry I don't like you. I don't have so many happy hours just now," she added, in a tone of reproach. "I think you should have allowed me to enjoy this one to the end."

"Stay a little longer, then, and let us enjoy it," he said. "Have your own way, and we will talk lightly, as if the world were a great play-house, and we were only the puppets set to play in it.

We are little else, I suppose. Sit still, and I will not vex you any more with my madness."

"Will you not?" she said. She looked with her wistful soft eyes into his face, eyes into which, when she pleased, she could throw such sweet momentary tenderness. "I like you so much the best when you are kind to me, and you ought to be kind, you know. I think"—she said, with a sudden little pathetic tremor in her voice—"you often forget how much I have to bear."

"I never forget that," he answered, quickly.

"I am so happy when *I* can forget it for a little while—when I can be with you like this, and know that I am away and safe, and that nothing will come to trouble me. We may never spend another such hour together again, you know," she said all at once.

"For heaven's sake, do not tell me that!" he cried.

"But we may not," she repeated. "How can I tell? Things come and go so fast."

"Why will you not make this thing sure, then?" he asked her, passionately.

But she only shook her head.

"I cannot," she said. "We have had our little bit of pleasure; now we must go back into the rush and whirl again."

"And you will not give me your promise?" he cried, in a last forlorn effort to detain and move her. "You will not let this hour be the beginning of years that a word from you now may make happy for us both? You care for me as you do not care for that other man. Do not give me up that you may go to him."

"I am not giving you up," she said, half aloud.

"No—you have not done it yet, but what do you mean the end to be, when you will neither take me nor let me go? You must choose between us soon. Is there nothing I can say to you?" he asked, in strong agitation, "is there no way in which I can move you—to make your choice to-day?"

He did move her to some degree, for she sat silent, with her hands pressed close in one another for a minute, and her eyes had tears in them when she raised them to him at last.

"You make it very hard for me," she said. "I thought you would be kinder and gentler to me."

"Gentler!" he echoed, in a tone that was half pitying and half bitter. "Is it a moment to be gentle when a man is pleading as I am pleading with you—be-

lieving that the happiness of two lives is hanging in the balance? As I sit here beside you I feel that I could fight for you to the death—that I *must* fight for you, and win you, and hold you; and yet—" he added, all at once, with fierce, half-smothered passion—" yet, even while I feel this, I almost feel too that you will slip from my hold in the end and leave me."

" You cannot tell that," she answered, in a low, quick voice. She looked at him again, with eyes into which almost a frightened look had come. " You may be wrong," she said, hurriedly.

" If that is so, let me know now that I am wrong," he pleaded. " Give me one word—less than a word. Only put your hand in mine."

But she would not. She was more moved than he had often seen her, for her lips quivered, so that for a few moments

she could not speak, but when she spoke at last she only said— "I cannot do it now."

"I cannot—you must not press me," she repeated hurriedly, after a moment. "Let us go home. We ought to have gone long ago. Yes—it must end soon, one way or the other, I know that; but not to-day—not now. Let us go home."

She rose up, and he did not try any longer to detain her. They left the room, and walked back to Chester Square across the Park. After a few minutes she recovered her self-possession, and began to talk to him again in a light, commonplace way; but he had been too much shaken to recover his composure. At her own door he parted from her gravely.

"Have I given you a sad morning when I should have liked to give you a

happy one?" she said to him suddenly, when her hand was in his at the end. "I am sorry for that. I am sorrier than you think."

"I suppose you cannot help it," he answered, bitterly. "Your business in the world seems to be to stab men's hearts."

"If I stab them, can I never mend the stabs I make, do you think?" she asked him: and then she looked into his face, her colour came, and all at once she turned away with a little laugh.

Perhaps she thought that he would follow her and enter the house with her, but he did not do that. He left her instead as the door opened, and went his own way.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Ludlows were about to leave town; but Hugh, when he was asked concerning his own movements, said he would not leave town with them, and then he muttered something about it not being worth his while as he should be going probably in a few days to the continent.

"Why, I thought you had given the continent up, Hugh?" his mother upon this remarked, but the young man answered rather shortly that he had never done so; he had merely let himself be

detained by one thing or another; he had every intention of going to Switzerland immediately. And, indeed, he spoke the truth, for only a few days before this he had heard that the Verners were going to Switzerland too. So Hugh in his madness meant to follow on their track.

It was August by this time, and on one of the early days of the month the Ludlows left for their house near Norwich.

"You had far better come with us, Hugh," Phœbe said to her brother a little before their departure, "for it seems to me"—and she looked into his face with her shrewd eyes—"that you have been knocking yourself up wonderfully during these last weeks. I should never have thought that two months of a London season would have had such an effect upon you."

A speech which of course Hugh did not hear without some irritation.

"How can you talk such nonsense!" he exclaimed in answer to it. "One would think you supposed I was a girl in a consumption. Two months of a London season indeed! Why, I was never better in my life."

"Well, if you are, I can only say you don't look so, and my mother thinks the same. And if nothing is wrong with your health," said the pitiless Phœbe coolly, "it is my opinion that something is wrong with you otherwise."

"You don't know what you are talking about!" Hugh exclaimed scornfully.

"Oh, yes, I do. I know something more than you guess," replied Phœbe in her quiet way. "You don't tell me many of your secrets, but I know a little about you, and where you go, and the people you are with; and I am sorry

for you, Hugh," said the girl suddenly. "You will get over it, of course, but I am sorry for you all the same; and if it were not that I am glad of one thing in the matter——" And then she stopped.

"What are you glad of?" cried Hugh with sudden vehemence, when she paused here. He almost guessed what she had been going to say; he knew that he could hardly bear to hear her say it; and yet with a momentary fierce determination he asked his question. "What are you glad of?" he said, with his colour rising and a flash in his eyes.

"That one fire will put out another," she answered quietly, and giving him merely one passing glance waited to say no more. For she knew by that glance that her arrow had shot home, and she went away with a stern satisfaction in her heart. She had always wanted her

brother to free himself from Dorothy, and now he had freed himself, she saw. As for the likelihood that Cicely Verner would marry him, she did not fear that much; perhaps she had heard from Miss Verner's friends how much better a marriage than one with Hugh it was in her power to make. Cicely would only play with him, and then leave him, she thought; and she was sorry that he should be played with, but for the rest she was not sorry, but glad. Miss Verner would leave him, and he must leave Dorothy, she thought; and then he might begin his life again, freed from them both, and a wiser man surely for what he would have passed through.

"I think Hugh had better go his own way," Phœbe said to her mother. "I don't know anything, but I guess one or two things, and if we let him alone now I

think we shall have less trouble with him in the end."

So Hugh was let alone, and early in August Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow and Phœbe left him in town, and went away to their country house.

The Verners were to start for Switzerland about a week later, they said. They generally went somewhere abroad. They were going this year to stay for some weeks at Grindelwald, Cicely told Hugh.

"Then I shall see you there if I come that way?" he said, and Miss Verner answered—"Yes, I suppose so," rather coldly, Hugh thought.

"Yes, of course you will—if we should all be there at the same time," she added the next moment in rather a more cordial tone.

"I would make my time yours," he answered.

"But we may change our plans after we start," she said. "We may not remain stationary anywhere. I don't know really what we shall do." And she gave a half sigh.

"What will determine your movements?" he asked her.

And then she said again she did not know. But she coloured as she spoke, and though she denied it, he believed that she did know.

"I am leaving it to mamma," she said after a few moments. "I care very little about it at all. I daresay you will find us at Grindelwald—and, if you do, you know one of us will be glad, at any rate."

"And where will Lord Millwood be?" Hugh said suddenly in a low voice.

"How can I tell you that?" she answered quickly.

"Can you not tell? I thought," he

said scornfully enough, "you might possibly happen to have heard."

"I have heard nothing," she answered.

"And do you care nothing?" he asked.

And then she made no answer.

He was not alone with her. They were talking in the drawing-room at Chester Square, and there were other people in the room; but they were removed a little from the others, and so for a few moments they were able to say to one another what no one else could hear.

"I am so tired of all this," she said suddenly and wearily. "A little while ago I used to ask you to stay with me, and now I almost wish I had never asked you. I think I was happier before you ever came here. If a part of me were asleep, what did it matter, when I did not know? I wish you had never come and awakened me."

She spoke half beneath her breath, in a hurried toneless voice; she raised her eyes to him for a moment with a look in them that was bitter and reckless, and yet that had a touch in it too of something soft.

"If I have awakened you, do you expect that I am to be sorry for that?" he asked her quickly. "Do you think you can tell me that I have done it without making me rather thank God?"

"Do you need to thank God because you have helped to make me miserable?" she asked, still in the same low listless voice. "I am sometimes very miserable. I am miserable to-day. And you have made it so for me that I cannot be happy now, do what I may."

Without waiting for him to answer her she turned away abruptly from him; for the next quarter of an hour she did not

speak to him again. But at the end of that time, as he was standing alone, she turned for a moment once, and looked at him; and then—powerless to resist her lightest invitation—he went once again to where she stood.

"Are you angry with me for what I said?" she asked him in a low voice when he had joined her.

"I am *never* angry with you," he answered in the same tone.

"I should like that to be true—but it is not true," she said. "You are often angry, I think, yet you come back; and I am angry, yet I call you back. We seem to want one another somehow. Do you think we do?" she asked suddenly, and looked up to him all at once with something that he could not read in her face.

"Am I to answer that question for myself or for you?" Hugh asked her.

"For me, I suppose—if you can answer it at all—but you can't do it. No single answer would be true. There are two sides to almost everything, it seems to me, and each of us is two creatures—or a dozen creatures, I sometimes think. Were you going away?" she inquired abruptly. "Well—you had better go. You have been here long enough."

"Do you tell me that because you want me to be gone?" he said bitterly.

"I cannot say," she half carelessly answered. "I want you to be gone, as one wants one's conscience to be gone sometimes. I think I ought to say—Go; and, if you can, never come back again."

"What makes you speak like this?" he asked her quickly. She was turning from him, but he made her stay. "Have you anything in your mind to-day that you say this?"

She did not answer for a moment or

two. She stood for that little while quite silent, looking on the ground: then she merely said—

"I have only in mind that I am unhappy—but that is no new thing."

"It is a new thing that when you are unhappy you should want to send me away from you."

"Yes, that is new," she allowed. "But if I have no choice? And how have I any just now? You see I must go and talk to those other people. I have stayed already longer than I should with you. Only I wanted you for one minute—just for this one last minute," she said with a sudden tremor in her voice.

She looked full in his face as she finished speaking with one of those sudden looks that thrilled him: she stood quite still, and let their eyes meet.

"Go now," she said softly the next moment.

"May I come back to-morrow?" he asked her, as she would have turned from him. Her glance had made his heart beat wildly. "May I come early to-morrow, when there is a chance of seeing you alone?"

Before she answered him, the colour rose suddenly and without apparent reason to her face.

"I am not sure—I don't know," she replied at first in a hesitating way. But the next moment she recovered herself, and, "Oh yes, you may come early if you like: you may come if you like before luncheon," she said. And then she gave him her hand; but as she bade him good-bye she did not look at him again.

He went from the house a minute afterwards, half believing that on this next day he should win her consent to be his wife. He thought that, wayward and changeable as she was, whatever heart

she had to give was given to him. She had all but told him so; how then could he help thinking it? He went from her, not yet without fear and doubt, but with hope uppermost. If he could gain her promise, he believed that he should be strong enough to conquer whatever other opposition should assail him; though much would assail him, he knew. For that a marriage between himself and Cicely Verner would please nobody he was well aware. By his own people it would be looked upon as even more objectionable than a marriage with Dorothy; by Mrs. Verner it would be opposed with her whole strength. Hugh was not blind to the difficulties in which he was preparing to involve himself, but he had long passed the point at which the prospect of future difficulties could act as any check upon him.

CHAPTER IX.

WE go to our fate sometimes with a light heart, sometimes with a foreboding of evil. Hugh Ludlow's heart was not light, it is true, as he took his way to Chester Square next morning, yet at the least he went with more of hope than fear within him. He went with all a lover's ardour, resolved, with a passionate resolution, if it were possible, to win this woman at last, for whose love he had recklessly lost and thrown away so much.

It was a sunny August morning, and as

he walked through the almost deserted Belgravian streets he thought with a thirsty longing of fair scenes far away, where, if he could be with Cicely by his side, life would become Paradise, it seemed to him. Alone with her; with all this restless frivolous world shut out; away from it all, where it could no longer vex him with its memories, nor disturb and taint her. He was deeply enough in love to believe that the height of human bliss would be to have her with him in some perfect solitude—some lonely island in a wide Pacific. The feeling of utter yearning for her had taken entire possession of him—the feeling that unless he won her life, would be without value to him.

She was not in the drawing-room when he was shown into it, and he was kept for a long time waiting for her. For a quarter of an hour he

waited, and then at last she came in very quietly, without speaking. They had met and shaken hands before she said gravely,

"You have been here for a good while, have you not? Yes, they told me, but I could not come. I was with mamma, and mamma wanted to prevent me from seeing you."

"Why did she wish to do that?" he asked hastily.

"Because she was afraid," she answered at once. "She had been scolding me, and she wanted me to send down word to you that I was engaged; but I would not do that, you see. I have come to you instead—with my red eyes. I told her that I *would* see you this morning. I have left her so angry that perhaps she will come in presently, and try to send you away; but it does not matter," said the girl with sudden recklessness: "I only want you for a few minutes now."

She spoke in a tone that seemed strange to him perhaps, but yet he did not pause to try and understand it, for his mind was full of what he himself meant to say to her, and his anxiety to say it was only made greater by these signs of her distress.

"I want you to sit down and let me talk to you," he said earnestly. "If Mrs. Verner has been making you unhappy you will listen to me the more willingly perhaps. Sit down, and let me reason with you—let me plead with you once more, for heaven's sake, to give me the right to protect you from such scenes. I cannot bear to see you like this. It stabs my very heart. Need I say anything more of what you are to me? Do you think if you came to me that you would not be happier than you are now?"

"If I came to you?" she repeated, in a slow dreamy way. She had sat down by

this time, and was facing him very quietly, with her hands folded on her knees. "If I came to you! Do you think I could do that still? and, if I could, would you still take me?"

"Do you need to ask me that?" he answered.

"I don't know," she said. "Sometimes I have thought of late that perhaps if you were free of me you would be glad. I have not brought much happiness to you, you see; I have brought a great deal of trouble, and very little else. But *would* you be glad?" and she looked at him wistfully. "Say 'Yes,'" she cried eagerly next moment. "You had better say 'Yes,'" she repeated, with a strange kind of tremor in her voice.

"Why are you talking like this?" he asked her. "How could you expect me to say 'Yes' to such a question? You know some little part of what you are to

me, but could I tell you, or ever make you understand, the whole? Do you not know that I have no longer any life apart from you, that I have no hope that is not locked up in you?"

"You are speaking to me like this for the last time," she said in a low voice.

She seemed to be trembling, and the colour had come into her face. She looked up at him, and said suddenly,

"I am going to put an end to this now. Yes, I am going to put an end to it," she repeated, "because it is too late." Her voice became unsteady, and almost failed her. "I came down to tell you that. I came to say that it is all over—because I accepted Lord Millwood last night."

"Good God!" he cried, starting to his feet.

And then he stood in dead silence,

struck dumb by this blow that had fallen on him when his hopes were highest.

And she—if she cared for any one in the world she cared for him; and with a smothered sob she burst into tears.

She was the first presently to recover herself. She began, after a minute, to speak to him again.

"You see, I have done this at last," she said in a dull, emotionless way. "He came yesterday after you were gone. I had told him in the morning that I would give him my answer at night—and so I gave it to him; and I am to be his wife —and you will be well rid of me," she added suddenly, with a quick convulsive movement of her lips.

But when she said this, he broke out into a wild appeal to her. It seemed to him as yet only like some unreal and terrible dream that he had lost her, and

he began to plead with her—desperately, like a man fighting both for his own life and hers. He would not believe that she did not love him; and he talked to her with a wild tenderness that made the colour come to her cheeks. Once she hid her face with her hands; but, presently, when he paused, she looked up at him again with eyes that were dry and almost hard.

"You want me to give my promise back to him," she said; "but what makes you think that I should wish to give it back? I have lived for this kind of end, you know. What else have I ever had before me? You thought I should do differently? Well—you were wrong, you see. You did not believe that I only cared for the world (as I do), and the things that the world can give me. I cannot live on love, as some women pretend they can. If that had

been possible, I should have done—what you wished, I suppose; but if I had done it, it would have been the worse for you. I tell you that now, because you think I have injured you; and so I want you to see that the injury is very small. I cannot make myself different from what I have been all my life. I may seem to be different sometimes, for a few minutes, but that is all. If I had come to you I should only have made you suffer; and I might have got to hate you perhaps, because of what you had made me lose. I shall never hate you now," said the girl softly, all at once, with a break in her voice.

"Did you not know it would come to this?" she said to him again presently. "Were you not prepared for it? You have told me to be true to myself, and have I not been true? Have I not sold myself," she said bitterly, "as I always

meant to do? as I would have done weeks ago, if it had not been for you?" There was a sudden reckless scorn in her voice as she said this. "You see, you have had some power over me; you have held me back for a little while; you have shown me glimpses of another world that has been—that has been sweet enough to make me think sometimes, for a few moments, that I could have been happy if I had lived in it. But I should not have been happy. I did not love you well enough. And so—this is the right ending, and we must say good bye to one another now."

And then she rose up, as if she would have given him her hand at once, but he was too mad with pain yet to leave her.

He was almost beside himself. It seemed to him in these first moments of anguish that the loss of her was more than he

could bear, made doubly bitter to him, as it was, by the feeling of all besides that he had lost. In his passion he began to tell her what she had done to him, and to reproach her with having ruined his life.

She turned away her face from him while he was speaking: she was not unmoved by what he said, though she tried not to show him her emotion.

"Then you mean to repent that you have cared for me?" she only said in a low voice. But, after a moment or two, she raised her eyes to him, and suddenly a light came into them, and in a voice that had a tone of passion in it, "I do not want you to repent of it!" she said hurriedly. "Not yet, at least—not for a little while. What is the harm that I have done you?" she went on quickly. "I have taken you away from that other girl. Yes! I know that. I have taken

you from her, and let you love me for a little while; and now I throw you off. I have acted selfishly; but yet I needed you, and I did not call you recklessly. I tried to love you—I tried hard to love you in the way another kind of woman might. Will you not believe that? Will you not believe it?" she said, and went to him, and suddenly laid her hand on his. "I needed you, or I would not have made you come; and you must forgive me, now at the last."

"How can I forgive you?" he cried hoarsely, and he flung her hand away from him.

"If you have loved me, why should you not?" she answered quickly. "Think how often you have said that you would give your life for me. Well, I have taken a part of your life—not the whole, but only a little part; and can you not yield that up, and not hate me because

I have taken it? Remember, the waters are going to close between us now; we shall never again, after this hour, be anything to one another. You must forgive me before you go away."

"I would to God we had never been anything to one another at all. I would to God I had never seen you!" he cried in his agony.

"Do you, indeed, wish that?" she said in a low voice. And then she looked at him wistfully, and though she tried to hide them, the tears came into her eyes. "Well," she said, "that seems hard to me; when *I* have loved you better than I shall ever love any man again. But if you are so bitter against me—then you had better go and forget me, if you can. Go now (though you have been kind to me, and I shall remember that); go now," she repeated, and looked at him for one moment, with her hands

dropped at her side, " and believe, if you like, that I was never worth loving—or remembering."

With her last words, she turned away. Before he could realize what she was doing, she had left the room; and five minutes afterwards, Hugh found himself in the street, a desolate and shipwrecked man.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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